middleground!

middleground!

By Joe Clabby

The POTUS Series

Book 1: inflection!

Book 2: hypocrisy!

Book 3: middleground!

Other Books by this Author:

dam!

A History of Eastport, Passamaquoddy Bay, and Vicinity

YouTube Videos by this Author (search YouTube by these titles):

Eastport in Context

Eastport Historical District Tour

The Quoddy Dams

To the Reader:

This is a historical fiction story about an attempt to find a middleground between Republicans and Democrats. If you lean left, you'll likely like this story; if you lean right, you'll likely not like this story.

America's political gap is huge, and distressing. For every ten people you meet, around six in ten Americans generally disapprove of the job POTUS and Congress are doing — leaving about four in ten generally approving of immigration enforcement, freedom of speech, the handling of the economy, and the war. And there appears to be no common ground to be found to mitigate these polarized viewpoints. For the sake of the nation, we must find that middleground!

History is generally studied to understand how we arrived at our current state; why things are the way they are; and what patterns we may be repeating. We can learn from the successes of the past, as well as from past failures. Hopefully, history teaches us not to repeat our past failures...

Sincerely,

JC

The first book, **inflection!**, covers the timeframe between:

Feb. 2025 - June, 2025

The second book in this series, **hypocrisy!**, covers the timeframe between:

June, 2025 - December, 2025

The third book in this series, **middleground!**, covers the timeframe between:

December 2025 – February 2026

The fourth book in this series, **playbook!**, (yet to be published) will cover the timeframe between:

January 2026 – March, 2026

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PART I: A NEW DIRECTION

Chapter 1: Speaking Out

I thought everyone loved my speech — that it had been a rousing success. But I was wrong...

*

My name is Olivia Thomason, and I am a transwoman college professor at the College of New Brunswick, St. John, where I teach political science. I moved to St. John from Bangor, Maine, where the College of Maine had fired me for advocating radical protest of current U.S. government policies and procedures — I had, apparently, been rocking the boat a little too hard...

What got me in trouble at the College of Maine was that I had been particularly vociferous about the current regime's anti-Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies. I wanted the school to take an aggressive stance against the regime's homophobic, transphobic, biphobic, gayphobic, and queerphobic executive orders and policies. The school was unwilling to "put student education at risk, should our protests cause federal funds to be withheld." Perhaps that's a practicable and justifiable decision for the College — but, to me, it was not acceptable.

Unemployed, I now had time to focus on other regime injustices. So, along with another teacher who had also been let go, a particularly astute student who knew how to exploit social media, and a morally motivated reporter, we all used social media extensively to launch a campaign against the government's inhumane immigration policies. We even created a reality-TV-style streaming show that featured our analysis of DEI and immigration issues in the U.S. It was a rousing success.

Having taught for over 30 years and having published several books on politics, I have outstanding teaching credentials. So, when I offered my teaching services to the Provost of the College

of New Brunswick in Canada, she and various members of her staff were intrigued. I proposed teaching an international politics course, but I would approach it from a different angle: a comparative governments perspective. I would compare various government structures, from democracies to monarchies to republics to federations to one-party states and theocracies, and contrast these forms with America's version of democracy.

The course was very well received and over-enrolled. In fact, we had to find a bigger venue to fit the overflow crowd, so we cordoned off a section of the College's Dining Hall and used it as our classroom. Because the dining hall was an open space, faculty, staff and other students were free to listen in. I had 95 students officially enrolled in my class, but there was no door, so at times, the actual audience size I guestimated often exceeded 125.

The fact that my course had been so well received by students and faculty alike led the Provost of our College to request that I speak at the school's annual scholarship fundraiser. And that's how I ended up giving an insightful, rousing, thought-provoking fundraiser speech at the College the week before Christmas 2025.

Chapter 2: The "Shitshow Down Below"

I started my speech by explaining to the audience that I am a "*Fiscal Republican*." I let them know that I agree with the Republican ideas of less government oversight, fewer regulations, the elimination of government administrative bloat, the elimination of waste, fraud and abuse. But I also want our government to be stringently fiscally responsible — to balance our budget, stop borrowing money to float specific conservative governmental initiatives and to pay for entitlement programs.

I pointed out that with the passage of the administration's "*One Big Beautiful Bill Act*," the new regime added an estimated $4.1 trillion to the national debt! Due to that bill, I contended that the current regime has mortgaged our financial future and that of future generations to come to pay for the implementation of an extremist right-wing agenda. This budget action has made me practically apoplectic. I told the audience that I was still a Republican with traditional Republican values — but emphasized that *I am not one of those vindictive, godless, white supremacists, gender-hating "MAGA Republicans."*

After setting the stage by sharing my political outlook, I launched into a blistering review of the current regime and its extreme right policies, and I registered my disgust with the clearly broken American political system. I talked about the screwed-up economy; affordability; the immigration situation; the anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion actions; the illegal bombing of boats in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean; the use of the National Guard and the military to target American Democratic cities; the vengeful attempted prosecutions of those who have opposed the new administration's policies and leadership; the attacks on the freedom of the press; the attempts to manipulate

colleges and universities — the assaults on food benefits and healthcare — and the list goes on and on...

I concluded my speech with an apology for the inhumane scourge the current U.S. government has brought to the world.

As an aside, I let the audience know that, given U.S. government policies that deny the existence of my gender, I decided to move out of the United States, which is why I have relocated to St. John, New Brunswick. My mother was born in Canada, so I applied for Canadian citizenship and received it quickly!

"*So now I'm also Canadian!*" I proudly declared.

One man in the audience shouted, "*Welcome, brother!*" as the crowd applauded. I think he probably meant "Welcome, sister!" but his welcome was appreciated, nonetheless.

At the conclusion of my speech, the attendees gave me a heartwarming, enthusiastic round of applause, followed by a standing ovation. I had not expected that. I had never had a standing ovation in my life! I could tell from the ensuing praise that they were impressed. I had delivered my speech with passion, and I think the audience completely empathized with me and my perspectives.

*

As I made my way to the follow-up banquet, several audience members trailed along, making comments along the way.

"Nice job!" said one of my new admirers as I left the stage, "you really laid into him."

Another nodded, saying, "From the heart."

Another said, "It's a total shame what is happening in your former country."

One said, "We call the situation in America '*the gong show to the South.*'"

Another attendee corrected him, saying, "Some of us call it '*the dumpster fire across the line.*'"

"It's also been called the '*circus below the 49th*,'" said another attendee who had been listening to our conversation. The 49th is a reference to the parallel that separates much of the U.S. from Canada.

I was also aware that some Canadians call our situation "*The shit-show down below...*"

Chapter 3: My New City

St. John is a fabulous city. It's got a mix of natural wonders, historic landmarks, and tons of local flavor. The "uptown" section of St. John is its historic core, featuring Victorian architecture and cultural institutions, including museums, theaters, and the *St. John City Market*, the *Saint John Arts Centre*, the *Imperial Theatre*, and various art galleries.

My favorite part of St. John, however, is officially known as *Area 506 Waterfront Container Village*. Locals, however, call this place "*Container City*," and it's packed with shops, live music, microbreweries, and restaurants. It is called *Container City* because it is made from old shipping containers, the kind you'd find on a semi-truck that hauls forty-foot intermodals.

It's kinda cool what they've done with these containers. They cut openings for doors, windows, vents, and HVAC units. They offer various types of doorways, including roll-up, personnel, and sliding glass. Sometimes they install skylights for both light and ventilation. And they join multiple containers together by cutting out walls and welding units together. And when they're done with their structural work, they paint their containers in eye-popping bright colors. Once they've modified their containers, shop owners install racks and shelves for clothing and knick-knacks, and bar owners bring in their bars and seating to accommodate the Spring, Summer, and Fall crowds. It's all very festive. I'd describe Container City as "quirky fun."

*

There are a couple of things I've noticed while living in Canada that are worth mentioning.

I love the St. John area. It has a population of about 78,000 people and is the oldest incorporated city in Canada. It is a clean city, and the people are very friendly to me. When they

sometimes learn that I'm trans, they readily accept it. They seem to understand — they seem to know that some people's brains are wired differently than others, and mine is wired as a woman. I have not yet run into anyone who has "transphobia" — fear of transgender people. It is a relief to be more readily accepted.

Another observation is that they talk funny, ending many sentences with the word "eh." It reminds me of the joke about a Canadian student in a spelling bee who was asked to spell the word "Canada," and her response was C-eh-N-eh-D-eh...

To be fair, as an American, they think I talk funny, too.

*

Still another observation, and this is a big one, is that they really, really, really dislike the President of the United States (POTUS). Not long ago, POTUS proposed that Canada become the U.S.'s 51st state — and that's an absolute insult to Canadians. In the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, the United States evicted its ancestors after the American Revolution. Consequently, St. John is also known as the "Loyalist City." And if the eviction was not enough, the United States made several attempts to seize Canadian territories in the years that followed. In fact, the threat of attack by the United States was one of the reasons British North Americans confederated to form Canada. It was a defensive measure. Do Canadians want to become part of the United States? Not a chance in H-E-double hockey sticks...

The business community in St. John strongly and vehemently opposes the U.S. tariffs. St. John is a manufacturing hub, an energy producer, and a shipping hub. Last year, 96.3 percent of St. John's finished products were exported to the United States. But U.S. government tariffs have quashed trade between the U.S. and Canada. Canadians are now focused on finding new buyers.

The POTUS tariffs are honestly hammering this city's economy. With its heavy reliance on exports to the U.S., St. John is now recognized as the most tariff-vulnerable city in all of Canada. Calgary, in the province of Alberta, is a distant second. Both cities rely on oil refining for tax revenue. In St. John, 320,000 barrels of crude are processed at the Irving plant daily. And 80% of that refined crude goes to the U.S.

St. John also hosts a pulp and paper mill, and it is home to the largest and oldest independent brewery in Canada, the *Molson Brewery*. Molson is a good example of how tariffs are affecting St. John. Canada mines a lot of aluminum and exports much of it to the United States. As Canadian aluminum crosses the border, it is subject to U.S. tariffs. The U.S. produces "aluminum rolls" with Canadian aluminum, and finished beer cans are made from those rolls. Those finished cans, when shipped to Molson, are subject to retaliatory tariffs under Canadian law. Molson purchases 100 million aluminum cans per year, so those tariffs are sizeable.

But the tariffs don't end when the cans arrive at the Molson Brewery. Molson ships 20% of its beer to the U.S. — and that beer is, again, subject to another U.S. import tariff.

According to the city's mayor, St. John is moving on from the US. The city is encouraging Canadian exporters to go through St. John to reach Europe, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. Currently, St. John is exporting about 1.2 million tons of frozen fish, french fries, clothing, and furniture to those destinations.

So, although the people here are friendly, they are also bothered by America's treatment of its largest trading partner, Canada. America has lost much of its respect here.

Chapter 4: Home Sweet Home

Living in St. John has been wonderful. I live with a fellow teacher, Stephanie Pelletier, who, ironically, is also a transwoman. We met down in Portland, Maine, several months ago, hit it off immediately, and have been fast friends ever since.

*

I remember the first time I met Stephanie with fondness. We had each ventured over to Blackstone's in Portland, Maine, a bar that caters to both straight and LGBTQ+ clientele. As I sought a seat, I did a quick "Stephanie take." *Very pretty. Refined looking, with understated beauty. Her cheekbones are high, her jawline strong, and her face is slightly angular. Her facial structure has a Gaulish, Celtic, French look about it.*

I then checked out her hair. *Nice platinum blonde, but with gray roots at the base. Almond-shaped green-gray eyes, quite expressive. She's got crows' feet*, I thought, *perhaps a little more mascara would mute those somewhat.* I estimated that she was around fifty years old.

I then looked at her hands. Hands are one of the first things I look at when trying to determine if a woman is straight or trans. To me, large hands usually indicate male biology; small hands usually indicate female biology. With Stephanie, I couldn't quite tell. *Medium-sized hands...*

Incidentally, I gave Stephanie the once-over in less than a minute. It's not like I'm some sort of stalker, or creeper, or something... I just make quick assessments before I sit next to someone. Some people don't like sitting next to LGBTQ+ people...

Stephanie, on the other hand, knew immediately that I was a trans woman. She recognized me from the Internet streaming reality show that I had been doing with fellow professor Mary Shelley.

"I know you!" she said as I sat near her at the bar. "You're that streaming reality show woman!"

I had been found out.

*

I still can't remember what shade of red my hair was that night; I think it was some shade of burgundy with auburn streaks. I was wearing a silk A-line dress with a slightly plunging neckline; my legs were freshly shaved; and I did a good job that day of hiding my wrinkles. I'm in my 60s, so, unfortunately, I'm starting to prune up. Ah, the ravages of age...

As I've gotten older, I've taken to meticulously and painstakingly applying my makeup, paying close attention to my mascara and lipstick. I don't want to cake it; I want just enough to smooth out my age lines.

My hair length was and still is a "long bob" that grazes my shoulders. My eyes are brown, and I have a six-foot-one frame, which I know is tall for a woman. And I'm a little muscular. And I have big hands and big feet. I have thin lips and a slightly upturned nose. Hard to believe, but in the old days I used to be considered "pretty."

I affirmed I was that reality-show woman, and we struck up a conversation. We ordered a bottle of wine, and then chatted about my show and about each of our careers. Astoundingly, she, too, taught at the college level as a Professor of Sociology. What are the chances?

After we shared that bottle of wine, she answered my big question. She said that she, too, is a trans woman. What are the chances?

My reaction: I thought so! *How delightful — someone like me!*

As we continued to get to know each other, we shared another bottle of wine. I also learned that she is French-Canadian by heritage; she owns a home in St. John in the Canadian Maritimes in the province of New Brunswick, about 4 hours from my home in Bangor.

I don't know why, but we quickly formed such a special bond that evening. We were both teachers. We were both drawn to each other's academic disciplines. We both liked going to new places, engaging in conversations with people, and having fun. And we were both trans. And perhaps we were both lonely.

We hit it off perfectly.

*

After meeting Stephanie in Portland, she and I stayed in touch. Because we stayed in touch, Stephanie was able to contact me about a teaching position that had just opened at her college, the College of New Brunswick in *St. John*. Even better, she wrote a few kind words that helped me get that job.

*

Our friendship deepened when she offered to help me settle into St. John. Until I find my own place, Stephanie has offered me the use of one of her spare bedrooms. She owns a restored Victorian home right next to a local landmark, Tapley Manor, on Victoria Street, upriver a bit from the city's major natural attraction, the *Reversing Falls*. It's a huge house, plenty of space for both of us. So, I gladly accepted her invitation.

I'll move out eventually, once I figure out where I want to live. Meanwhile, we spend a lot of time hanging out together, shopping, going to movies or streaming movies, cooking, and dining out. I like Stephanie. I like St. John. Life is good here — real good...

Chapter 5: Our Provost

After giving my much-ballyhooed speech, I continued walking with my entourage of donors to the nearby banquet room. There, I was greeted by Dr. Margarette Ellison-Fournier, a native of St. John, the person who had organized the fundraiser.

I count Margarette among my closest friends in St. John. She is, in no small part, responsible for my getting the professorship at the College. She, too, went to bat for me before the college president and the board, and her assessment of me and my credentials helped me get hired.

As for *her* background, she climbed the ladder in Canada's higher education system, first serving in an administrative role and ultimately becoming a teacher. While still teaching, Margarette shouldered a course load that allowed her to earn her Ph.D. And with that degree, she eventually advanced to a professorship in Canadian History at the College of New Brunswick in Fredericton.

When the provost position at the St. John campus became open, Dr. Margarette Ellison-Fournier applied. After a formal search and a hiring process overseen by the College President and the Board of Governors, she was deemed the best candidate for the job. She was granted the position due to her administrative experience, academic achievements, and teaching experience. The fact that she was a St. John native did indeed play a role in that determination; the Board loved the fact that she had been born and raised in St. John.

Chapter 6: The Lucien Mystery

I grew up in St. John as Margarette Ellen Ellison. But in 2005, when I turned 35, I finally met the love of my life; we married, and now I'm *Provost* Margarette Ellison-Fournier.

I met my husband Charles at the College of New Brunswick in Fredericton, the capital of our province, when he came to town as a visiting professor. And, the rest is history...

The College of New Brunswick's main campus is in Fredericton. It's just over an hour northwest of St. John. I had been teaching at that campus for over five years. And then the provost position in St. John opened up — and I applied. When the board agreed to make me provost, I couldn't tell you how thrilled I was. The thought of moving back to my home city filled me with fond memories and brought on a wave of nostalgia.

*

I remembered my high school years. I was young, and I was so much in love... This was way back in 1978, before I was married. I recalled that, in high school, I had a major crush on strapping, handsome, super-smart Lucien Tremblay.

That love would never be fulfilled because of the shock he delivered to our class, and to me, on graduation day...

*

I remember Lucien as a handsome, athletic, dark-haired, blue-eyed, stalwart Catholic boy from Waterloo Village, a section of St. John that has historically faced high poverty rates and various social challenges. We had a few classes together in high school, and I remember thinking: *he's so smart, he actually rivals me academically, and that's no mean feat.*

"*Lucien is smart, but I'm smarter*," I was convinced as we both contended for the honor of being class valedictorian. I wanted that honor, but at our high school, as is the case with many other high schools in Canada, the valedictorian is not necessarily the student with the highest academic rank in the graduating class.

At our school, to be valedictorian, you had to fill out a "*nomination form*" declaring your intent. Accompanying that form, you had to submit a written statement articulating why you deserved the valedictorian title. And here's the kicker: the valedictorian at our school had to deliver a speech to the class. A staff committee of teachers was chosen to evaluate candidates on their public speaking, the messages they would share with our class, and their leadership qualities. The staff committee selects finalists, and the entire class is given the opportunity to vote for the student of their choice.

It turned out Lucien had been chosen. He was my academic equivalent, but he was a superb, self-assured, natural, and extemporaneous public speaker. I had excellent grades, and I wasn't afraid to speak publicly, but Lucien managed to win the honor. Of course I was disappointed, but I also recognized that Lucien had outperformed me in presence and in public speaking.

On a more positive note, I did, however, get the consolation prize. I was the second-place finisher and thus became the class salutatorian. Whoopee...

*

Over the course of our high school years, despite our academic competitiveness, Lucien and I became close friends. We would hang out after class, perhaps meet at the library, or occasionally have lunch together in the cafeteria or outside at the picnic tables during fine weather. Lucien would often tease me, calling me "*Miss Bookworm*." And he got a real kick out of my complete

ignorance of sports — especially of our national pastime, hockey. We often engaged in boy/girl, playful, light-hearted banter. But Lucien was always respectful, careful not to mock me or hurt my feelings. I liked Lucien's playful teasing. No, in fact, I loved it — I craved the attention of that bright, funny boy.

*

When my girlfriends and I became high school freshmen, we all started to "date." Well, I should say "we all — except me." I remember thinking about Lucien: *He'd make quite the catch for me, we really like each other...*

Yet, despite our friendship, Lucien showed no interest in dating me. Hang out — yes; date — no.

I would share my frustration with my girlfriends. "*Our brains are a match," I would confide, "but the rest, not so much.*"

"Aw," they would say, "he's just girl-shy. He'll break out of his shell someday..." They all agreed with me that he was brilliant and funny — and they all knew that he was religious, a devout Catholic. But why he wouldn't date any of us was a mystery to us all. "Such a shame," my girlfriends would say, "so handsome..."

"If he dates anyone, it will be you," they all assured me. "You two are so smart — you'd be perfect for each other.

Yes, we would be perfect for each other, temperamentally and intellectually. But I'm puny, skinny, bespectacled, with a weak chin and slightly discolored, slightly crooked teeth — not a real looker — and I'm quite self-conscious about my looks and appearance.

As a backhanded compliment, the boys in class always used to say about me: "Well, she's a helluva good dancer..." None, however, had ever offered to date me...

Chapter 7: Lucien "Comes Out"

I eventually learned why Lucien had shown no interest in me, or, for that matter, any of the other girls in our class...

On graduation day, Lucien was honored to deliver the valedictory address to the graduates and other attendees. And he seized that moment at the podium to unleash a message so explosive it rattled the entire graduating class and all of the other attendees.

*

Lucien had been preceded by other speakers — the high school principal and a few of the teachers, all of whom talked about the exciting journey we were to embark upon. It was the usual, sickly-sweet drivel that parents like to hear — and that teenagers loathe.

Lucien was finally granted the stage. He began by thanking all the teachers and staff, parents, and other attendees as we all awaited his words of wisdom. Personally, I couldn't wait to hear what he had to say.

Lucien paused after the thank-yous and surveyed the student body. However, he looked all of us over as he spoke. And as he did that, I felt like he had focused on me.

"We've heard a lot today about the glorious opportunities we have ahead of us. The world is our oyster. Some of us will go on to become doctors and nurses; others will become executive managers, others may enter politics, and still others will become skilled laborers. Many of you will get married and raise families. And someday you will be sitting here, in the audience, watching *your* own children graduate."

Lucien paused again as he readied to share his big announcement. "As for me, I have already chosen my path forward. In two weeks, I will be entering the *Society of Jesus* — and, over time, I will become a priest. My journey into the priesthood, especially

the Jesuit priesthood, will be a long one. The road to ordainment generally takes 15 to 20 years and is fraught with challenges. I will start as a novitiate, serving two years of discernment and vows. My novitiate will be followed by intense academic studies and pastoral work with a congregation, and eventually I will be ordained a Jesuit priest. This journey, I am sure, will be the biggest challenge of my life, and I hope I'm up to it. Please consider saying a little prayer for me as I embark on this life-defining pilgrimage."

*

The audience was strangely silent. Stunned, I should say. Some students gasped. We were all looking at each other, wondering what to say and how to react.

A few moments passed, and then Lucien's father stood up and yelled, "Congratulations, Lucien, you've made me very proud!"

And then the student body followed shortly thereafter, standing and applauding, and breaking into cheers, saying, "GO LUCIEN! GO LUCIEN! GO LUCIEN! It was a beautiful moment for everyone there.

In truth, I was shocked and speechless — my initial reaction was "*No. Oh no. Not that. This could be a huge mistake*..." I didn't know what to do or say. I felt a definite pull at my heartstrings.

Minutes went by as I reconsidered what I had just heard and seen. *Lucien is to become a Jesuit priest? The Jesuits are considered the "intelligentsia" of the Catholic Church, so it makes perfect sense for Lucien to choose that journey. He would be joining the intellectual elite, the literati, the opinion makers.* I could, kind of, see the Jesuit match for Lucien.

After a few moments, my concern turned into excitement — I was suddenly extremely proud of my friend. "GO LUCIEN!" I chanted as I joined the cheering.

Chapter 8: The Introduction Request

Upon graduation, Lucien and I each went our own separate ways — Lucien to the priesthood and I into educational administration and then teaching. However, we stayed in touch regularly, and we would usually see each other around Christmas time.

*

This particular Christmas, about two weeks before the blessed day, I got a call from Lucien. Our conversation started with, "*Hello, Dr. Ellison-Fournier, this is Father Lucien Tremblay.*" Even in our old age, he still likes to tease me with our formal titles...

I'm always thrilled to hear his voice. "Lucien, so great to hear from you! I hope you're coming home for Christmas?" I replied, sincerely and with anticipation. Sometimes his church duties kept him from celebrating Christmas at home in New Brunswick. I was hoping that was not the case this year.

"You betcha I am," he said enthusiastically. "Looking forward to it — and looking forward to seeing you again."

"Shall we go out for Italian or steak?" I asked, knowing he gravitated toward either the Italian by Night or the Church Street Steak House.

"With the cost of steak, I'm thinking Italian!" Lucien responded immediately.

He paused, preparing to change the subject. "But, heh, there's something I want to ask you about before we go out to dinner."

"Sure, Lucien, what is it?"

"Well, I noticed on your website that you've got a fundraiser scheduled for Thursday, December 18th, the annual scholarship fundraiser, and that you've got that reality TV professor speaking."

"I do," I affirmed, "And Olivia is quite a presenter, she taught a comparative politics course this past semester and had students, class monitors, and passers-by glued to their seats as she compared the slide of U.S. democracy with what's going on with other governments. She's quite the draw; a lot of people are intensely interested in what she has to say."

"I subscribed to her show when she was doing it, and I loved it," Lucien responded. "I'd like to attend your fundraiser if I may. Any chance you can get me an introduction?"

I thought about that for about one second. "I can do better than that, if you wish," I volunteered. "Right now, I'm working on the seating arrangements for the banquet after the speech — I could place you right next to her," I offered, then paused.

"That would be a *godsend*," Lucien punned.

And I replied, "And by the way, yes, I got the pun."

Lucien snickered.

I considered Lucien's request for a moment and realized that he was up to something. "Why, what's up?"

"I've got a streaming Reality TV idea I'd like to run by her, and I'd like to hear what she has to say. I'll run it by you at dinner to get your opinion."

His request seemed innocent enough. "Consider it done," I paused, brought up the seating chart, and put Father Lucien Tremblay's name on the chair right next to Olivia.

"I get up to St. John on Tuesday, the 16th. Let's go out together on the 17th. I'll share my idea with you then."

"Agreed," I replied. "I'll make the reservation. Looking forward to seeing you again; we've got lots to catch up on."

“Can’t wait,” Lucien said as he ended the call. “See you soon!”

I took a moment to ponder our phone exchange. He had given me a hint, but I was still wondering what he was really up to...

Chapter 9: The Italian Dinner Revelation

Lucien arrived, as he said he would, on Tuesday, December 16th, two days before the fundraiser. I had arranged a "catch-up dinner" on the evening of the 17th as promised, at the best Italian restaurant in town: *Italian by Night*.

We arrived separately, but I saw Lucien enter the restaurant just as I finished parking my car. I quickly caught up with him.

There we were, standing in the receiving area, two old friends: a Jesuit priest in his clerical suit and Roman collar, and I, a college Provost, in a boring, typically academic tweed outfit. Had you seen our reception at the restaurant, however, you would have thought we were royalty.

Upon our arrival, the manager, Jean Le Page, who was clearly not Italian, rushed over to see us as we entered his "trattoria." "Father!" he exclaimed, "You're finally back! And you've brought Dr. Ellison-Fournier with you! We are all so happy to see you again!"

We had both known Jean in high school. We were "special guests" to him, and we knew that he and his staff would go out of their way to make this evening an exceptional dining experience for us.

*

The trattoria itself is what I'd call semi-modern. It has an exposed ceiling with wooden joists, dim string lights, and hanging lights that highlight its rustic trattoria-like feel, brick exterior walls, a few modern paintings, and a formal dining area with linen tablecloths and fresh flowers. And it's so clean you can practically eat off the floor. It's a cross between a cozy, old-world feel and modern elegance.

As for the food, taste is one thing, presentation another. No matter what you order, all of the restaurant dishes taste homemade — real Italian. And the presentations are all carefully prepared; their designs are both whimsical and artistic.

*

Within moments of our being seated, Jean sent over an antipasti platter with bruschetta, arancini, some small poletti, and house olives. He then came over to greet us more formally.

"Madam, sir — I will be your waiter tonight," he teased and smiled. "May I bring you something to drink to go along with your antipasti?"

Lucien paused, trying to decide between wine and beer, and asked, "I've been hankering for a beer. Can you recommend a good local beer?"

"All of the small batch beers by *The Loyalist City Brewing Company* are excellent," Jean responded, showing Lucien the various choices on the beer list.

Lucien took a few moments, smiled devilishly, and said, "Here's one for me. I'll have the *Lupulus Interruptus*," he announced.

I guffawed. I just broke into a grin and shook my head. I immediately caught the painless incongruity of a Latin-speaking celibate priest ordering a beer with the word "*interruptus*" in the title. I couldn't suppress my laughter; it was Lucien being Lucien.

"What?" Lucien asked. "It means that a *little wolf* had somehow been *interrupted*," he translated, as Jean also chuckled. "The poor little beggar was probably hunting in the woods, and something disturbed his hunt," Lucien playfully dismissed the word "interruptus."

I looked down, shook my head from side to side, and grinned from ear to ear. The same old Lucien...

"Interruptus for me, too," I told Jean, and Jean smiled broadly. I saw him shaking his head, and I heard him chuckling as he retreated to retrieve our drinks.

*

We sipped our beers while picking at our antipasti. Lucien and I caught up on our jobs, families, and current activities. I did not press Lucien, at that juncture, to learn what he was really up to with his request to meet Olivia. *I will get to that over dinner,* I decided.

As we finished the appetizer and the local drafts that Jean had brought us, Jean arrived with the dinner menu and wine list, then left us to our own devices.

*

A few minutes later, Jean returned to take our dinner and wine orders.

The menu featured traditional Italian dishes, including pasta like spaghetti carbonara and penne, as well as chicken parmigiana. And all of those dishes are excellent. But you go to *Italian by Night* to partake of some of the more unusual, off-the-beaten-path, exotic offerings like *Burrata* with tomato, basil, lemon, garlic, EVOO, balsamic, and grilled sourdough, or *Osso buco d'Anello*.

We both chose the *Osso Buco*, which is Italian for "bone with a hole." It's a marrow-filled bone at the center of a braised veal shank served in an intensely flavored, velvety sauce and topped with herby gremolata.

"Have you chosen a wine to accompany your meal?" Jean asked, knowing that we knew our way around fine wines. He did not

offer us any suggestions; he knew we were fully capable of making our wine selection based on the meal we had chosen. Lucien left the choice up to me, and I paired our meal with a Tuscany red wine, *Brunello di Montalcino*, known for its cherry, spice, and leather flavors that harmonize with savory veal.

*

"Father Tremblay," I started, calling him by his formal name to let him know that we were changing the subject to something more serious. "I want you to tell me more about your requested introduction to Olivia Thomason. What are you up to?"

Perhaps I was too blunt; he looked surprised. But then I realized that he was only surprised that I had figured out that he had an ulterior motive.

"You've found me out," he admitted and smiled. "And 'oh so quickly'" he lamented. "I must be slipping..."

"Old age will do that to you," I affirmed, delighted that I had pegged that he had a separate agenda.

He had an idea. He wanted to find a way to get Olivia involved in another streaming show that would focus on reducing acrimonious political polarization in the United States. He shared this idea with me, along with his proposed show format. I assessed that his proposed streaming show would be different from the one-sided right- or left-streams. Very different. He planned to run it by Olivia after her fundraiser speech to see if she was game...

"That's awfully ambitious," I intimated as I considered his plan. "You're going to try and get Olivia interested in a show that tries to mend the liberal/conservative split. I'd love to see how that would be done."

"I know," Lucien responded. "I don't know exactly myself. We'll just kick the idea around and see what we come up with."

*

Throughout dinner, Lucien asked me a lot of questions about Olivia, her personality, her intellect, her flexibility and willingness to accept new ideas. And I think he was pleased with what he learned. "She sounds ideal," he summarized. "Can't wait to meet her."

The dessert choices were Pavlova, crème Brulée, and chocolate cake. We were stuffed and passed. I still regret passing on that crème Brulé...

The whole experience was "a feast fit for the gods." The food. The company. So uplifting. So lovely to be with Lucien again...

Chapter 10: The Banquet Dinner

As I entered the banquet room after my rousing fundraiser speech, I was greeted by Provost Margarette, who escorted me to a large round table seating seven of our most generous donors, some of whom I already knew. And my housemate, Stephanie Pelletier, was there as well; she would be seated to my left. To my right sat a Catholic priest I had observed taking notes during my speech, but whom I had not yet met.

Margarette led me around the table, making sure I was correctly and formally introduced to each donor. As I was introduced, they all gave hearty handshakes, and the compliments kept pouring in. They all told me that they had liked my speech. I felt flattered, my ego was definitely being fed...

"And you, of course, know Stephanie," Margarette said as she continued her introductions, "but kindly allow me to present our honored guest from Boston College. This is Father Lucien Tremblay." She paused. "And Father, may I present Professor Olivia Thomason of our Political Science department?" She paused again and looked at me. "I've known Father Tremblay from early childhood; he is a dear friend. He is in Saint John visiting family and friends, but he specifically requested an introduction to you. He's a big fan of your DEI and immigration reality series."

"Father, it is a pleasure to meet you," I responded as I extended my hand. And immediately, my internal database began computing. *He's from Boston College, so he's a Jesuit. The Jesuits are best known for their emphasis on education, intellectual contributions, and commitment to social justice — my kind of people.* I could tell immediately that I was going to like this man of the cloth.

"I'll leave you both to your own devices," Margarette said. "I suspect that you two are about to have a very '*spirited*' discussion," as she smiled at her own pun. That smile was more like a smirk.

Later, I learned that Margarette and the good Father had dined together the previous night. Unbeknownst to me was that she and Father Tremblay had contrived a plan for me, and Provost Margarette was giddy with anticipation to learn my reaction to that plan...

"Enjoy yourselves!" Margarette teased, as she excused herself and made her way to a nearby table, sitting just far enough away to be within earshot.

*

Why had our Provost been so cagey in seating me next to a Catholic Jesuit priest? It would take a short while to find out, as we were interrupted by a discourse delivered by our college president...

*

The President of the College of New Brunswick, Dr. James Robert MacAllister, took the stage to make a few remarks before we progressed to dinner. "I'm proud to announce that we raised $15,000 CAD tonight for our scholarship fund," he informed us all. He went on to thank the donors for their generosity and was mercifully brief in his remarks, which is not like him. This guy is usually a real "droner."

With the President's conclusion, I was finally able to turn my attention back to Father Tremblay.

Chapter 11: The Good Father's Feedback

"So, Father Tremblay," I said, seeking to understand better how he fit into the picture, "the Provost just introduced you as a 'good friend' that she's known since childhood. So that means you're from St. John?"

"Born and bred here," Father Tremblay proudly replied. "And let's make this less formal. You can call me 'Lucien' or 'Father Lucien.'"

"Likewise, you can call me 'Olivia," or just 'Professor.'"

"And you're from America. Bangor, Maine, I believe."

I affirmed.

All eyes at the table were on us. And then one of the donors interjected, "Father Lucien and I attended *Divine Mercy Catholic School* for grammar school, and we both graduated from *St. Malachy's Memorial High School*. You should know that he was our class valedictorian, and that we're all very proud of him."

Father Lucien introduced the donor. "Olivia, this is Noah Desrosiers, and he runs his own international shipping company — and we're all very proud of him." Father Lucien then paused for a moment, then added, "But he may be speaking highly of me because he's trying to get in my good graces, so to speak. He's hoping I'll put in a good word for him on his path to heaven."

Everyone at the table laughed. And Noah smiled and nodded, "Yes," he said. "I admit it. A good word, if you please. It would really, really help!" The whole table was smiling and chuckling.

"So, tell me, Noah, what did you think of Professor Thomason's," Father Lucien corrected himself, "I mean Olivia's speech."

"I liked it, Father. I learned that there are different types of Republicans, and that not all are MAGA zealots. And I learned

that these zealots are not following Christian teaching, though they claim to be," Noah replied.

In my speech, I had described how the current regime uses "Christianity" to appeal to the religious right, but their policies don't follow Christ's teachings — not even in the slightest.

Father Lucien continued, soliciting feedback from other donors at the table. Several indicated they had no idea how rough things were in the America that I had described.

Several found the situation of care for the sick and poor in the United States to be unconscionable. One said it seemed that America had given up on its social responsibilities — and everyone at the table echoed that observation.

Another expressed concern wasabout America committing war crimes. I had mentioned that the US Navy was illegally blowing suspected drug boats out of the water.

And they were all disgusted by the current regime's attitude toward Canada. The United States aggressive trade policies, including sweeping tariffs, are costing Canadians their jobs. The US threats to withdraw from the North American trade pact are unwarranted and foster distrust between the two nations. And inflammatory rhetoric, such as POTUS's statement, "*We don't need anything from Canada*," has led to significant trade retaliation between the U.S. and Canada. And to boycotts on American goods and American stores.

In the end, they all agreed that my presentation had been "most informative."

*

"And that's the keyword," Father Lucien said. "*Informative*... We'll come back to this word '*informative*' later."

It was at this juncture that I realized dinner was no longer dinner; it was turning into some sort of class lesson. Father Lucien was using the Socratic method of teaching to lead us down a path to a conclusion he had predetermined.

And then the lesson commenced.

Chapter 12: Finding a Common Ground

Father Lucien looked at his notes. He then looked at me and said, "You said: 'consider the administration's immigration policy as an example — it definitely does not exude *love thy neighbor*, in fact, quite the opposite, it exudes *hate thy neighbor*.'" He paused, and then declared, "To me, that was the *most incisive* thing you said all evening."

I was puzzled. *Why had he chosen that particular observation as being so meaningful and relevant?*

"Allow me to explain."

The body posture of all of the donors had changed. Everyone was leaning forward in their chairs; absorbing Father Lucien's every word. They all knew him; some had even attended his Masses, and all were captivated by the good Father's presence and his teaching ability.

"Olivia, here's the rub. All of the attendees at this table found your presentation '*highly informative*.' And it was. But it was just that — informative. As for me, frankly, it left *me* hanging. You've told us what the problems are, but you've offered no solutions. And it seems to me that if America is ever going to get out of its current malaise, the inability to conduct meaningful dialogue between diametrically opposed, polar opposite members of American society must be bridged. Discussion must be opened to resolve some of the conflicts that you mentioned."

I considered what Father Lucien was saying, then voiced it. "So, you're saying," I extrapolated, "that my presentation is not really helping?"

"I think, Olivia, that you're presenting one side of the story. And a lot of people in this area are going to be sympathetic to that story. Canada does, after all, have socialist-inspired policies such

as universal healthcare, public pensions, subsidized education, and strong labor protections. But the problem is that one side of America says it wants these very policies, while the other side says it doesn't."

I paused to consider what Father Lucien was saying. *If I understood him correctly, he's telling me that presenting only one side of the story doesn't foster progress toward a mutual solution. Instead, if he is right, it fosters defensive divisiveness amongst those with opposing viewpoints and, in effect, increases polarization.*

At that point, I was stymied. "If what you're saying, Father, is true, how can ***I*** construct a solution given these diametrically opposing views?"

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"Before I answer that, Olivia, I want you to consider how a MAGA Republican would have regarded your speech. He or she would have heard that you want a government that coddles people. The MAGAs believe that black and brown people are getting a free ride off the U.S. welfare system. And they believe that minorities and immigrants are getting free healthcare and voting illegally. And they believe LGBTQ+ people are perverts, an abomination before God. And they think *they are the ones* getting stuck with the taxes to fund handouts for all of these people. So, every observation that you made in your speech does not resonate with them — in fact, it infuriates them."

Father Lucien was not done. He looked at his notes and continued. "You also talked about the faltering economy, the affordability crisis, the immigration situation; the illegal bombing of boats in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean; the use of the National Guard and the military to target American Democratic cities; the vengeful attempted prosecutions of those

who have opposed the new administration's policies and leadership; the attacks on the freedom of the press; the attempts to manipulate colleges and universities. And, finally, the Epstein scandal."

Father Lucien paused and looked me straight in the eyes. "Olivia, to the MAGA people and some of the other conservative Republicans, your speech would have come off as '*cry-baby whining*.'"

*

Father Lucien paused to consider a better way to illustrate his point. "Consider this: in front of every injustice that you mentioned, just put 'I *hate* your position on XYZ.'"

"XYZ could be immigrants," Father Lucien continued. "What you're saying to those on the right is '*I hate your position on immigrants*.' Or: '*I hate your position on the LGBTQ+ community*.' Or: '*I hate your position on healthcare*.' And so on. So, tell me, how does this approach foster communication between the two opposing sides?"

I thought about Father Lucien's observation. *These are big, emotionally charged issues — and no one has yet come up with a viable solution to mending the broken bridges between the right and the left. Their ideologies are polar opposites; there is no middleground.*

"Father," I said, "I understand your concern that my speech, and others like it, may be divisive. But these are gargantuan issues." I protested and asked again, "How can '*I*' hope to help solve these binary problems?"

"You need to find a common ground."

I thought about that for a moment, then said, "I'm sorry, Father, I'm not following."

Chapter 13: Trying Again— The Parable

"Okay," Father Lucien relented, "Perhaps I'm being a little obtuse. Let me try a different approach... "I'll explain a solution to this problem using a parable." But before continuing, he looked at the other guests at the table and said, "I hope I'm not being too preachy. If I am, just let me know."

Stephanie, seated next to me, gets a little squirmish when it comes to religious discussions— she is not at all religious, and doesn't like religion being foisted upon her. But she did not oppose Father Lucien's use of a parable; it was, after all, a class lesson using the Socratic method, so she wanted to see where Father Lucien would take it.

"Alright, then. I call this parable *The Parable of the Monk and the Farmers*. And for those of you who have not heard of this parable before, there's a good reason. It is of my own making..."

"Here goes:"

> *An elderly monk was traveling through the countryside when he came upon a farmer and his son arguing over the use of the father's land. The father wanted his entire farm planted and operated in the traditional way; the son wanted to grow new plants, use new tools, try new methods."*

"So, there they were, at an impasse — neither one is willing to budge or compromise," Father Lucien interpreted.

Everyone nodded as they followed along. Father Lucien continued.

> *"As the father and son continued to argue, a traveling monk happened upon them, listened to their arguments, and offered an observation. 'A field this large cannot be tended by one vision. Its strength comes from balance – deep roots*

and new shoots. Tradition keeps it steady. Adaptation keeps it alive.'"

"The father and son listened to the monk's observation but remained inflexible in their opposing positions."

"The monk, having observed the unwillingness of the father and son to compromise, eventually said: 'Fine, I shall divide it for you."

"*The monk grasped his cane and drew a line in the dirt. The father and son looked confused, so the monk explained what the line in the dirt was for. 'Your property is now divided. You are each free to manage your property the way you see fit.'"*

"The father and son considered the monk's division of the land, and contemplated what this dividing line would have on the farm.

The father spoke first. 'But with this land divided, I shall have no one to work my land. My son will be too busy growing his own crops.'

The son spoke next, saying: 'I, too, will have trouble planting and harvesting my land. I do not have the wisdom needed to plant and grow my new crops, so my farm will not flourish.'"

"Perhaps," the monk suggested*, "you could benefit by working together."*

"The father and son reconsidered their situation. Yes, they now had control of their portion of the land, but without each other, what good was it?"

Father Lucien paused to let us ponder the scenario — to let it sink in. Because neither party was willing to compromise, both approaches would fail. His key point: *Each side had to*

accommodate the other in order for the farm to remain productive.

Father Lucien continued.

> *"Recognizing the error of his ways, the father pledged to work with the son on his project, and the son promised to continue working for the father. Traditional seeds were sewn, and with the son's labor, a bumper crop was harvested. But new seeds were also planted. They were planted under the father's guidance, quickly sprouted, and yielded a bountiful crop. The yield was greater than expected, and the father and son were happy again with each other..."*

"The father and son had shifted their focus from each zealously guarding his position, to a spirit of cooperation with one another for the good of the land," Father Lucien interpreted.

And therein lay the message, I thought. *If the U.S. is going to get out of its mess, both sides will have to figure out how to communicate and work together toward a common purpose.*

Interesting, I thought. *What common purposes do I have with the conservative 'rights'*?

The table was quiet as the donors cogitated on Father Lucien's parable.

"And, so ends the parable," Farther Lucien concluded, bringing his first part of his lesson to a close.

Chapter 14: Around the Horn

And then, unexpectedly, the lesson continued. With his parable story finished, Father Lucien asked, "Would anyone care to interpret this parable?"

To my surprise, Stephanie volunteered. "I think the land is clearly the United States. And I think the parable is about stopping the bickering between the father and son and focusing them on issues more germane to both." Stephanie had the same takeaway that I did.

Father Lucien smiled broadly, "Right on target, Professor Stephanie! 100% on target. Very good!" He was delighted that his parable had been understood by at least by one person at the table.

"Would anyone else care to comment?" Father Lucien asked as he surveyed the donors at the table.

Based on Stephanie's interpretation and Father Lucien's affirmation that the parable was about the United States, I jumped in. "I agree with Stephanie that the 'land' that the father and son are quarreling over is the United States. The disagreement between the father and son is similar to the disagreement between the Republicans and the Democrats, where both think their idea of how to farm the land is the best idea."

Father Lucien smiled again. "You're heading in the right direction," he said. "You are touching upon 'polarization.' So, what about the line in the dirt?" Father Lucien said as he looked at me.

"I'm afraid I haven't figured that one out yet, Father," I admitted. I was kind of stuck on that one.

Noah Desrosiers, however, spoke up. "The line in the dirt," Desrosiers offered, "is kind of a dare. It is an offer to let the

father and son each farm their own land as they see fit. It's like saying, 'Okay, here's the boundary line. The Monk took the King Solomon approach and split the farm. Yes, each person gets possession of the baby, but by severing the baby, they both lose. The Monk had posed: 'Each of you go farm your parcel and see how that works out.'"

Father Lucien smiled. "Yes, Noah," Father Lucien confirmed. "And why didn't they just agree to 'do it their own way?' That's what each of them originally wanted."

That one stumped everyone at the table. Father Lucien waited patiently until someone was willing to venture a guess.

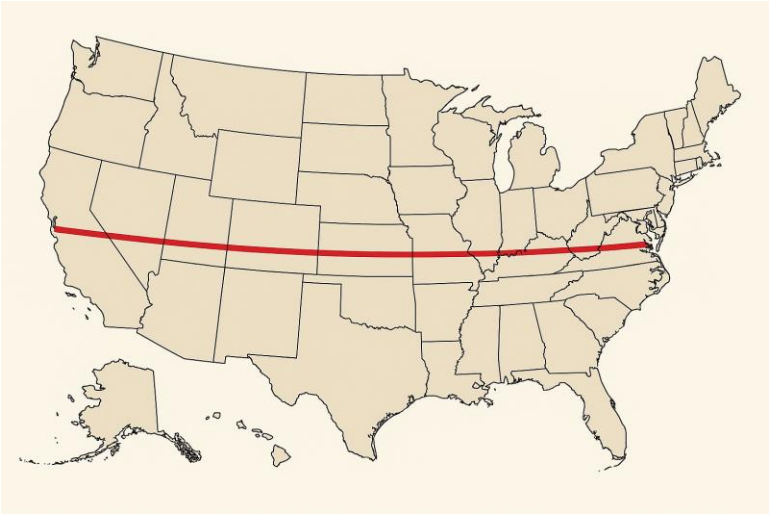
Another donor, Fiona Dupree, joined the discussion. I knew her; she owns The Dupree Market on St. John Street. "I'm not sure," Fiona ventured, "but in the King Solomon parable, two mothers were fighting about who owned a baby. King Solomon proposed cutting the baby in half — so each mother got an equitable split." She paused. "Not so good for the baby..." She paused to relate the Solomon parable to the situation in the United States. "If we're talking about the U.S., and Republicans and Democrats, was the monk's offer an offer to separate the United States into two countries — a red country and a blue country?"

*

Ms. Dupree was venturing down a path I had long considered. What would happen if we were to divide the United States into two countries — a Northern country and a Southern country? It could be divided along the old Civil War Mason-Dixon line, for instance. The Northern U.S. would consist of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, most of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Northern Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Northern California, Oregon, Washington, all of New England, and the Upper Midwest,

including Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

The remaining states could form the Confederate States of America, with its capital at Mar-a-Lago, Florida.



The problems with dividing the U.S. into two countries are many. There are substantial economic differences, with the new Northern country holding the major financial hubs and most of the technology centers. Notably, San Francisco would be North of this line. The North would also be home to heavy manufacturing facilities and served by several major ports, including Boston, New York City, and Seattle.

The Southern country, the Confederacy, would have advantages in energy from oil and gas production and agriculture.

Both countries would be economically viable.

As for the population distribution, the Southern country would be more heavily populated. And interestingly, the new line would divide the heavily populated city of Los Angeles, with most of its population south of the line.

There would be significant cultural challenges if this occurred. Indiana, Kansas, Utah, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota all lean Republican and have values different from those of the other states in the Northern Union. The mindset of these states would have to change to a more progressive agenda. As for the Southern country, mindsets in Delaware, Maryland, New Mexico, and Virginia would have to change and adapt to a more authoritarian type of rule.

Militarily, both countries would have their fair share of military bases, nuclear facilities, and industrial capacity. But the split does raise some interesting challenges, such as how the Northern and Southern countries can protect themselves from each other...

There would also be complications regarding interstate commerce, border protection, water rights, the division of the energy grid, and the separation of military assets.

In short, a split would be possible, and to many, desirable. But would it be wise?

*

Father Lucien continued with his parable, relating it to the parable of King Solomon, and picking up on Ms. Dupree's question about the meaning of the monk's line in the sand.

"It was," Father Lucien confirmed. "That's the lesson of the King Solomon parable, and my parable. Because the U.S. is so polarized, occasionally extreme rhetoric surfaces that suggests that the United States should go through a *'national divorce*' — they should split the baby in half. But the father and son quickly recognize that splitting the land, and trying to 'go it alone' with their shares, would not be practical — and that forced them to reevaluate their relationship."

"So, then what happens?" Father Lucien asked.

I volunteered an answer. "By drawing that line, the monk forced each side to consider what would happen if they chose not to work together. The father's land would fail because he didn't have any labor. The son's land would fail because he lacked the knowledge and expertise to guide the farm in a different direction. In the end, they recognized each other's true strength and decided to work together as one for the good of the land."

Father Lucien confirmed my interpretation. "The parable shows that the farmers' differences of opinion were *secondary*; *ultimately, they both needed to do what was best for the land to make it efficient, fruitful, and productive*."

He let that sink in. All the heads at the table were nodding. Everyone had gotten his message: working together can yield better results, with each party capitalizing on the other's strengths.

*

I had long ago decided that splitting the U.S. into two countries was impractical. U.S. states are highly interdependent for resources, energy, military defense, and brainpower.

I considered Father Lucien's ultimate point: that the U.S. needs to stay together and address its polarization. But having reached that same conclusion a while ago, I thought: *Working together on what?*

Oh, I suddenly realized*, he means working in unison on important issues such as healthcare affordability, government efficiency, fiscal responsibility, housing affordability, and job creation. These are all key issues that both parties are clearly concerned about and would be willing to work toward.*

I wondered whether my future presentations could help raise awareness that these are the issues we should all, in a bipartisan way, be working on...

I noted that this doesn't magically fix polarization — but it reframes the battleground. *Instead of arguing about boys in women's sports, abortion, immigration, equal rights, white supremacy, misogyny, and all of the other secondary incendiary issues that we're all squabbling about, why don't we change to the issues we all want addressed? Issues that promote unity, rather than issues that promote divisiveness...*

And therein, I realized, was the good Father's message to me. *I could act as a catalyst, bringing the diverse political parties together around issues we all want addressed. I could help steer the divisive toward the truly important issues the American people want addressed.*

*

"So, what's the bottom line?" Father Lucien asked me.

"The bottom line of this parable," I said, "is that the Republicans and Democrats need to all start doing what's best for the country rather than what's best for their political party."

"Exactly!" Father Lucien replied, nodding his head.

"I get it, now, Father," I affirmed.

He wants me to refocus my future presentation on building bridges rather than tearing them down... In future speeches and streaming shows, I think his point is that I need to focus on why Republicans and Democrats need each other, and how they could work together on key issues such as the economy and healthcare, and actually make progress on causes desired by the American people. He wanted me to find a way to foster intergroup cooperation and communication, focusing on common goals rather than constantly sniping at each other.

Chapter 15: A New Show?

We all thought we were done with our lessons, but no — Father Lucien continued. We entered a new phase of discussion: *group problem-solving*.

"So how do we go about affecting this change?" Father Lucien asked. We had determined that my future presentations should focus on providing solutions instead of just identifying gripes.

"The only way we can effect change is through our votes," I offered.

"But think about that," Father Lucien suggested. "Many Americans are hoping that the midterm elections next November will wrest power away from the current regime and restore some of it to the Democrats. Yes, that could happen," he observed, "but if it does, we still have the same problem. *One party will try to control the other,* and neither will work for the good of ALL American people, only the ones who embrace their ideology. So, the question remains: How can we *find a common, non-partisan basis for discussion that supports initiatives that the American people really care about*?"

Father Lucien let that question gestate. The table reflected on the question; everyone was laboring to come up with suggestions on how to move forward, but no ideas were forthcoming.

When no one offered any recommendations, Father Lucien revealed what he had been building up all evening. He asked, innocently, "*Do you all think that perhaps a streaming show that takes aim at finding a common ground between the right and the left might work*?"

Everyone at the table, except me, smiled and nodded affirmatively. Father Lucien had just revealed the point of the entire evening: *he wants ME to do another reality show*...

My initial reaction was non-receptive. Putting together a reality show is a lot of work. You've got to come up with a format, you've got to line-up guests; you've got to find videographers to stage the show and edit it; you've got to come up with dialogue; you've got to build a base of viewers — and most important, you've got to find a way to monetize that show because there would assuredly be some expenses involved.

Am I willing to sign up for all of that?

Everyone was looking at me. Should I do it?

I started to reconsider my initial reaction. If I did do a show, I could have a tangible impact on the polarization situation. I could help change the political discourse in the U.S., and I might find common ground that promotes communication between the right and the left.

"I'll give it some thought, Father," I promised.

But I was still leaning toward a "no" answer.

Chapter 16: The Sociology Lesson

During our "lessons," we had been served appetizers and the main course. And, as we waited for dessert, my favorite sociology professor, Stephanie, spoke up.

"If I may, I'd like to offer several observations from a sociological perspective. regarding how to go about opening up a dialogue between the right and the left, and how to go about changing people's minds."

Stephanie paused for affirmation. All eyes were on her — everyone was all ears. Everyone was nodding.

Father Lucien voiced: "By all means."

So, Stephanie continued. "In sociology, we focus on how social structures, group identity, and communication patterns shape political beliefs."

She paused to be sure she wasn't being too academic. And I sensed yet another class lesson was coming our way...

"To change people's minds, you need to understand their *identity* — and the groups they belong to. Are they rural Americans with a whole bunch of rural logic formulating their beliefs? Are they religious — and, if so, are they moderate or extreme? Are they working class, and do they feel included in mainstream society? Are they outside the norm, like Olivia and me, because we live alternative lifestyles? And what social networks do they belong to? To change people's minds, you're going to need to reach them on their specific community level — no matter what their community is."

She let that point sink in and then continued.

"Also," she continued, "it is essential to understand that *people trust their peers more than outsiders*, so you're going to have to

figure out how to connect them with people of their own ilk. You'll need to find ways to reach local politicians, family members, church groups, workplaces, etcetera."

Stephanie paused, and everyone was silent as they considered Stephanie's perspective.

A few moments went by. "So, how would you reach out to these people?" Father Lucien asked.

"I think that what you're trying to do, Father, is encourage Olivia to do another reality series. And yes, she will reach a generic broad brush of people if she decides to go forward with another reality show. But her messages may not reach the specific people whose minds you would like to change. Olivia will likely be classified as a liberal, and that will cut the potential audience in half. And all of the people who have transphobia won't watch her because she's a trans woman."

Father Lucien looked confused. And as I looked around the table, the donors looked confused as well.

Stephanie explained further. "If Olivia does the show, she will surely be creating content," Stephanie declared. "But to affect widespread change, you're going to have to create tailored content for various audiences — you're going to have to hit them where they live."

Stephanie's message was starting to sink in.

I said: "So you've got to present your content through a channel that they know and trust. So, what you really need to do to be effective with this 'middleground' plan is find a way to get content from various sources through the channels that the people you are trying to reach use as their information sources."

"Not exactly," Stephanie replied. "I think you're going to have to get them off of some of their biased channels and steer them toward new sources that they can trust."

The table turned its attention to Father Lucien and awaited his response.

"Wow!" he said. "That's a brilliant insight. To get our middleground message to a variety of audiences, we'll need to find ways to direct people to trusted sites. "It makes perfect sense. So how would we go about that?" Father Lucien asked.

Stephanie thought for a moment and then suggested, "We have to make them more *media literate*."

*

The dessert arrived just as Stephanie completed her observation. And it was something I had never heard of before: Nanaimo bars, served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. As it turns out, Nanaimo bars are considered an iconic Christmas dessert in Canada. They're rich, no-bake, triple-layer confections with a chocolate-coconut-nut crumb base, custard-flavored buttercream in the middle, and a smooth chocolate ganache on top. A real Christmas treat!

Chapter 17: The "Media Literacy" Lesson

After dessert was delivered, one of the donors, the little guy in the corner with the five o'clock shadow, asked, "What do you mean by 'media literate?'"

I felt it coming — yet another lesson? This was getting interminable. I thought my head was about to explode...

Stephanie thought for a minute and came up with a perfect example to illustrate the need for media literacy. She used Canadian media outlets to show media biases.

"Well, media stations have biases. Consider the CBC. The *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* is considered center-left or progressive in tone. And *CTV News* is considered centrist, but I'd argue that it has a bit of a liberal lean."

Everyone was nodding.

"*The National Post*, as you all know, leans conservative, especially on economic and fiscal issues. And the *Toronto Star* is clearly progressive but leans quite left at times."

She paused to think of a final example. "And the *Toronto Sun* clearly leans right."

And then she defined what media literacy does. "A media literacy program teaches you how to spot the differences between these news outlets so that you can recognize bias, misinformation, and even persuasive techniques. With that knowledge, people can choose more honest news sources. And that's how we work our way into their lives with our 'middleground' message. We get them to start listening to honest, centrist stations, and reading honest, unbiased news."

There it was, in a nutshell. Teach people how to sniff out the truth. Then they can apply that knowledge to their own news

sources to ascertain if they are being lied to or manipulated. And teach them how to find reliable, less biased news sources. If this can be done, people would move away from biased, one-sided news and move toward the center. And that's where we need them to be to be receptive to our middleground messages.

Father Lucien posed the next question. "So how do we get people to become 'media literate'?"

"I'm not exactly sure, Father. I know there are courses people can take, and I know there are government programs that promote media literacy. But I don't know how they are going about it, nor do I know what results they are seeing. But I'll look into that and get back to you," Stephanie promised.

*

The table got really quiet as we all considered our evening conversation:

- We started with Father Lucien explaining why he didn't like my speech; in fact, he found it harmful to opening mutually beneficial conversations with conservatives. That surprised me, and he was quite correct.
- We had explored ways to correct my one-sidedness, and the answer was to start presenting more balanced material. I needed to do fewer *stir-the-pot*, *woe-is-me* speeches and turn my attention to finding a common ground that encourages two-way communications. Father Lucien suggested I do that using my reality-show format, and I had yet to decide whether I wanted to pursue that option.
- Stephanie's contribution was that we needed to find new ways to reach the right and the left and wean them off their biased news sources. And she suggested that "media literacy" might be the path to do just that. She promised

to do more research on that topic and get back to Father Lucien with the results.

*

I happened to glance at Provost Margarette, and she had cast her attention in our direction. She looked concerned, wondering, *"Is this going well?"*

I saw that look and made the "okay" sign with my hand, then shook it a few times.

Wow! What an evening!

*

As we prepared to leave, Father Lucien and I exchanged contact information. "Let me know if I can be of any assistance," he offered. I told him that Stephanie and I needed to discuss our options — and I would get back to him in a few days with our plan going forward.

PART II: THE JOURNEYS

Chapter 18: Decisions

After the gala fundraiser dinner, Stephanie and I hopped into her BMW X7 SUV for the ride home. We had had quite an evening. I had been on a high after the reception and after my speech. Then I was deflated, brought back to earth by Father Lucien, who suggested I reorient my future speeches to be less confrontational toward those on the other side of the aisle. "*Find the middle ground*," was his parting challenge to me.

At the dinner table, we discussed various approaches to solving the U.S. polarization problem. And Stephanie had indicated that one way to find a more balanced approach to discussions between the political right and the political left could entail an educational program that teaches voters to become "media literate."

*

"Well, Steph," I said as I seated myself in the passenger seat, "What did you think about this evening?"

Stephanie smiled and shook her head. "It was quite 'something,'" she answered cryptically.

We were both silent for a few minutes, taking it all in. I said, "Well, the big question on the table is: *Do we want to do this*?"

She replied, "I think the bigger question on the table is, 'Do *you* really want to do this?' Do you really want to get involved in producing another streaming show*?"* And then she added*, "I know I don't want to do a show."*

I was kind of surprised by that. Hmmm. *Does she not want to be involved in a streaming show? She'd be a great host who could bring an international perspective to my new reality show, should I choose to do one. Plus, I had Mary as my partner last time, so I was used to working with a partner — it helps balance the show.*

Then I thought: *She doesn't necessarily have to be involved in the construction and production of a new show. I could embark on this quest by myself. So, she's right. It really comes down to "what do I want to do?"*

"Good question," I affirmed. "*Do I really want to do this?*"

We were both silent as we weighed the pros and cons of the situation. I finally spoke. "Well, at least I'd know what I'm signing up for. First, I'd have to create an action plan. Then I'd need to share it with Tito, my social media guru, to see if he thinks my new 'unity' show has legs. Heck, I already have a large following. To be effective, Tito and I would have to find a way to leverage my existing base into this new endeavor. And, because my following is largely progressive left-leaning, we'd have to figure out a new way to attract other viewers from the right."

Stephanie replied, "So do you want to do it?"

Chapter 19: The Moment of Truth

It was now the moment of truth. As we retrieved our coats and walked to the garage, I had had about half an hour to consider introducing a new show. It was now time to make the big decision...

"I kind of do," I answered, "it would be quite the challenge, and if it is successful, it might succeed in opening up some constructive rather than continued backbiting. Father Lucien was right — we can't keep sniping at each other and retreating further into our ideological shells. Somebody must find a way to open up a non-hostile dialogue."

"That's settled, then," Stephanie surmised.

"So, I'll tell Father Lucien that I will look into relaunching my Internet reality show. What should I tell him about you?"

"I'm on a different track than you — I think I want to go down a teaching path. I'm thinking I want to pursue teaching people how to interpret the news, sniff out biases, and learn to find truth."

"So, you want to go down the media literacy path?"

"I like the idea of possibly creating a course at the College. I think we need one. We've got too many people getting biased news. I'd like to show them how to evaluate their news sources and get clearer pictures of what's going on in the world."

It did sound like a good idea.

She continued to muse. "I would probably offer it with a sociology spin on it. I could talk about how media shapes people, groups, institutions, and power; and I could show how it influences our societal interactions."

"I think that's a great idea," I replied. "So, should I tell Father Lucien that you will not be participating in my show, but that you'll be going down the media literacy path?"

"That works," she confirmed, "but also tell him that as I teach the course, I will look for ways for media literacy to be applied to his polarization concerns."

"Well, so what I'm interested in doing, and what you're interested in doing, don't match. I'm more interested in a 'streaming show,' and you're more interested in a teaching route," I said. "So, I'll tell Father Lucien just that."

Chapter 20: Hypnagogia

I called Father Lucien when we got home. He was thrilled that I was going to look into doing a balanced show aimed at helping to conquer the polarization problem.

"And tell Stephanie how pleased I was with her contribution to our conversation at dinner. She really opened my eyes to media literacy. I'm going to look into it more closely when I get back to the rectory."

*

After that phone call, I sank into Stephanie's parlor sofa, while she made us martinis. The sofa is of Victorian design with a high, rounded back and unbelievably deep, comfortable cushions. The upholstery features a beautiful burgundy floral design with a tapestry-like texture. And the woodwork is rosewood, elaborately carved with cherubs, vines, and leaves, leading down to a claw-and-ball foot base.

Stephanie brought our drinks, and we both sat on the sofa exchanging more ideas about my potential show and her media literacy course. And the more we talked, the more excited I got.

"Let's talk some more about this in the morning," I eventually suggested. I was beat, and the martini helped me relax, but also made me tired.

She asked, "Heading for bed?" I affirmed.

When my head settled on my pillow, I almost immediately fell asleep. But before I entered a state of hypnagogia, a new thought came to me. I thought "*Phil Donahue*" *before* I drifted off...

Chapter 21: The Recap

When Olivia called, I was sitting in my priestly garb by the fireplace in my parents' den in my childhood home in the Waterloo Village section of St. John.

When I finished talking with her, I stood, took off my black jacket and removed my Roman collar, sat down, ready to provide my parents with a recap of the evening.

"Her speech had left me wanting more," I lamented. "I didn't want to hear about unsolved problems; I wanted to hear about joint solutions to problems."

I told my parents that Olivia's speech, at least to me, was like a forty-five-minute rant about all the stuff the current U.S. regime is doing wrong. And I told them that speakers who go off on these negative rants aren't helping the situation; they're further inflaming the situation, raising the ire of those with different opinions.

"In order to reverse the polarity situation in the United States," I ventured, "speakers need to turn down their rhetoric. They need to stop complaining about each other and, instead, find a common middleground."

My father considered my observation and said, "Lucien, you're asking a lot of these professors. Some of the best political minds in America have been unable to find a middleground."

I agreed. "*But how are you going to start a dialogue between two warring groups if neither listens to the other. Someone has to get the ball rolling by talking about what each group has in common, such as desires for better healthcare, affordable housing, or government efficiency and modernization. Constant negativity gets you nowhere.*"

Mom, Dad, and I talked for a few more minutes, but Mom and I were tired, so it was time to go to bed.

I made my way to my bedroom, removed my clerical black shirt, black shoes and socks, and trousers, and neatly folded them and placed them on a chair beside my bed. That was my nightly routine as a child; it's funny how some habits stick with you for life.

As I started to drift off, Stephanie's observations lingered in my thoughts. I kept thinking about her "*media literacy*" suggestion and her point that, to reach various audiences with new ideas, you have to get local buy-in, because change and new thinking start at the *regional level*. I wondered whether she could find a creative way to apply this media literacy approach to help Olivia address polarization.

Chapter 22: Our Christmas Tradition

The rest of the week flew by with visits from friends and relatives, and before you knew it, it was *Christmas Eve*. As a family, we stay up late on *Christmas Eve* so we can go to Réveillon, which we Catholics in Canada call Christmas midnight mass. And when we get home after Mass, we have an early-morning breakfast. First, we break out the champagne, then Mom serves smoked salmon and a cheese course. Dessert is usually *Bûche de Noël*, the traditional Yule log cake. It's not one of my favorites, so I forgo it. After this little feast, and after celebrating the joy that Christmas brings, we all go to bed.

Lunch is served at around 2 p.m. on Christmas Day. Mom starts with her *Soupe aux Pois*, pea soup with split peas and whole peas baked in a slow cooker. The soup was thick and had a slight ham flavor, coming from the ham hock she had saved from the previous evening and added to the soup. I know this sounds a little weird, but I like to mix in a couple of packets of soy sauce with my split pea soup. I think that really perks up the dish. Otherwise, I find pea soup to be boringly bland.

The pea soup course is followed by what many consider to be the pinnacle of French-Canadian Christmas dishes: *Tourtière*. It's a savory pie filled with ground pork, beef, or veal. In this case, it was pork. Mom seasoned it with cloves, nutmeg, allspice, sage, and thyme, and she adds mashed potatoes for binding.

For dessert, out comes the *Bûche de Noël*, again. And I passed, as could be expected, on partaking again. I did partake of Mom's butter tarts — and they were, as I had expected, scrumptious.

*

A few of my aunts and uncles came by in the early evening to say goodbye to me. I planned to leave late that Christmas night to return to Boston College.

When everyone had left, Mom and I decided to watch our favorite Christmas movie — *The Grinch.* Mom and I know all of the lines, and we say them in unison along with the Grinch.

"Holiday-whobe-whatee?"

"Blast this Christmas music. It's joyful and triumphant!"

"Hate, hate, hate. Double hate. Loathe entirely."

And so on...

Dad just rolls his eyes...

*

After *The Grinch,* we snacked some more, and then Mom and I watched an old Bing Crosby movie, *Going My Way.* She has it on DVD, and we always watch it when I come home to visit. She loves that movie...

The film follows a priest, Father Chuck O'Malley, played by Bing Crosby. Father O'Malley is sent to help the aging Father Fitzgibbon at St. Dominic's Church in New York City manage his parish. The parish is struggling financially and spiritually, and O'Malley's job is to turn things around — and ultimately replace the aging priest. The ending is heartwarming...

*

After we finished watching *Going My Way*, it was time to leave. I had slept most of the early morning and got up around noon, so I was rested entirely when it was time for my ride back to Chestnut Hill.

Chapter 23: The "Think" Ride

I prefer driving at night, so I don't run into any traffic. I said goodbye to my mother and father at around 11:00 P.M. on Christmas evening and headed back to Chestnut Hill. Mom cried like usual; Dad was stoic, as usual. It had been marvelous to see them again, and I kind of felt sad about leaving them. They're in their late 80s now, and I wonder at times if I should try to move closer to be there for them. But I know they're tremendously proud that I'm a priest and a Professor at Boston College, and they wouldn't want me to give my professorship up for them. I prayed that I would find them in good health next year when I returned to St. John for Christmas. And I also said a few prayers for them as I drove home.

*

The only challenge driving at night on the way home is the trip down the "*Airline*," the nickname for Maine's Route 9 from Calais to Bangor. I've heard all sorts of reasons the road is called the Airline; to me, the most believable is that if you took a flight from Calais to Bangor, it would be pretty much a straight line like an airline flight. Anyway, you must be extra careful on that road at night. Deer. Bear. Moose... A few years back, I saw a large truck that had smacked a moose; the moose was mushed into the semi's grillwork. I figured that at that stretch of the road, the semi was probably driving about sixty miles per hour. What a gory mess. The front of the semi had been caved in considerably, and the moose didn't fare well, either.

The Airline ends in Bangor, and then a quick connector road, Route 395, leads you to Interstate 95. 95 from Bangor to Massachusetts is also a pretty straight shot. Just hop on 95 going South, and you're in the Boston area before you know it.

*

I had a lot of time on that drive to think about what had transpired in St. John regarding Olivia Thomason and Stephanie Peletier.

I really liked Stephanie's idea that the way to start bridging the gap between Republicans and Democrats was through better media analysis. If we can teach listeners about how to sift out fake news from both parties and replace it with more truthful news, we might make some serious headway in helping the parties communicate.

And then it struck me. I'm one of nine priests on what is known as the "*Bishop's Council*." We all serve as analysts and advisors to the bishop on matters pertaining to local Church operations. The matter at the forefront for the past month has been *declining Church attendance*. We've been discussing how to increase our attendance, as over the past few years, we've seen a significant decline, even though Catholics are supposed to attend Church every Sunday.

Is going to church on an assigned day really necessary? I wondered. *Is required church attendance the best vehicle for delivering our Christian messages? Is it possible to deliver the Gospel, the Epistles, Eulogies, and Homilies over the Internet?*

My epiphany on that drive was: *Maybe we're using the wrong metric, counting the number of people in Church. Maybe we should be reaching out to people the way most of our parishioners receive other information — via the Internet*. I wasn't sure how to do that or how to measure the success of such an effort, but I felt it was worth exploring with the Bishop's Council members when I arrived home.

Chapter 24: The Breakfast Discussion

I arrived at *St. Mary's Rectory* on the campus of Boston College just in time for breakfast, so I said my blessing after being seated next to several of my fellow Jesuit priests and proceeded to order my breakfast.

I should mention that breakfasts at St. Mary's are pretty special. We can order omelets with a wide range of ingredients. The list goes on and on. Cheeses include cheddar, feta, goat cheese, and mozzarella; vegetables include bell peppers, onions, spinach, mushrooms, and tomatoes. Proteins include bacon, sausage, ham, and, on occasion, smoked salmon. There is also a wide range of fruits to choose from, including fresh blueberries and strawberries — and these fresh fruits are available in the middle of winter! I've heard that they're flown in from Jesuit missions in Mexico. And, of course, there are several bread choices for buttered toast. As one of my fellow priests jokingly lamented a while back: "I think they give us these wonderful meals because we're not allowed to have sex..."

*

Each of the dozen tables in the dining room seats six, and I was the sixth man at the first table near the kitchen swing-door. The topic of my trip to St. John came up, and I told my fellow priests about my dinner with Olivia Thomason and Stephanie Peletier.

"In St. John, I had a discussion with Professor Thomason from *The College of New Brunswick*. She spoke on all of the wrongs the current administration has foisted on the American people. Her speech was informative, but I suggested that instead of giving negative speeches highlighting all of the administration's shortcomings, she should start speaking about *solutions* to the problems that she had identified."

I paused, then continued. "As our discussion continued, another professor, Professor Stephanie Pelletier, suggested that one of the things that could be done to get Americans focused on solutions to the polarization problem would be to improve Americans 'media literacy."

Priestly ears perked up with the mention of media literacy. A few of my fellow breakfasters knew what media literacy was; the others were intrigued when I defined it and described how it could help people make better decisions by separating truth from fiction.

I then segued into the idea I had while driving home from St. John. "I'm starting to wonder if we should be actively promoting the use of media literacy techniques to our parishioners. Sort of show them how to find reliable, trusted information sources in order to make informed opinions. And once they've formed their opinions, we can then overlay our Catholic religious guidance on their findings."

"That sounds like an interesting idea," Father Anderson commented. You're talking about teaching our parishioners how to find unbiased truths and then overlaying Jesus' teachings on those truths. I'm just wondering how you would go about that. How would you contrast their versions of the truth with the truths that you discover through media literacy? And how would you reach them with a religious message overlay?

"I've been wondering the same thing. We could email them a few questions before Mass, ask for their opinions on topics like the ICE raids and whether they consider them justifiable, then structure Jesus' overlay over the findings they share, and deliver our religious messages in our homilies. That would be the 'deliver in Church' mode. But, with attendance dropping in Church, I wonder if it is possible to take the same approach virtually over the Internet."

"The commandment says, '*Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy*,'" Father Anderson pointed out, dubious of using Internet outreach as a means to interact with our congregations.

He was essentially saying that the commandment requires us to go to a physical church on Sundays, and I'm not sure that attending a church in person is truly required to keep the sabbath holy. So, I responded: "Yes, the third commandment does say that, but it does not say 'remember, *you must go to a church on Sunday*. I believe that our congregations can still keep Sunday holy, but doing so does not necessarily necessitate a trip to a physical church. I think they can still keep it holy by listening to our Christian messages online. And this is a question that I want to explore at the next *Bishop's Council* meeting.

The big question I was seeking an answer to is: *"Can we reach our flock more effectively using media literacy combined with Christian teachings over the Internet as opposed to requiring physical church attendance*?"

Chapter 25: Secular Encroachment

My thought about finding an online way to deliver Christ's teachings sat on the table for a moment, and then the breakfast table discussion shifted to a broader discussion of why attendance is down.

"One of the reasons why attendance is fading," Father Durban joined in, "is '*secular encroachment*.' We've got churches and religious institutions adopting non-religious, secular political views, and this secularism is driving some churchgoers to go down a different path, usually a political partisan path. And that's where we lose them. Why do they need guidance and advice from the Church when they can self-discover truths on their own?"

Father Harkin then joined the discussion. "I wonder that, too. We've got several churches, synagogues, and mosques that are aligning ideologically with political influences. And, by doing so, they are undermining each religion's religious doctrines. Jesus preached 'love thy neighbor," but some churches favor the arrest and imprisonment of immigrants. How Godless, how un-Christlike can you get?"

Father Durban added, "And you've got priests and ministers softening or reinterpreting doctrines to avoid controversy. Or, conversely, you've got priests and ministers who overtly align their churches with political parties. Moral positions, as you mentioned, Father Harkin, are shifted away from religious doctrine to endorse political positions."

I considered Father Harkin's and Father Durban's positions and said, "Yes, I agree. We're sending mixed messages to our congregants. And that's why I would argue we need to pay closer attention to our outreach. We've got to find new ways to reach our congregants."

I agreed. "I think that we should act as a conduit and teach them how to sort between good, valid information versus bad, inaccurate information — while at the same time reminding them of our Christian values of love, compassion, humility, integrity, peace, and justice."

All but one agreed with my position. "Information gathering, especially on political topics, is a secular activity," Father Harney adjudged, "We're in the religion business."

I think he's missing the point, I thought. *This is the way the world is headed, and we'd better get on board...*

Chapter 26: The Harari Segue

Father Riggard took the conversation on a new path. "Have any of you read any of *Yuval Noah Harari's* books? He's got four excellent books on the move toward a more secular society."

I looked around the table. Two of my fellow Jesuits indicated that they were familiar with Harari.

"I've read all of Harari's books; he appears to be anti-religion. Religion, to him, is a human construct driven by a need to believe in a Supreme Being to help us humans deal with unknowns like pestilence, or war outcomes, or other problems beyond the control of man," said Father Dressler.

"I see him somewhat differently," interjected Father Shapler. "I initially thought of him as a heretic; he seemed to be rejecting the doctrines of his religion. But I kept reading and changed my opinion. I then thought of him as an apostate, essentially rejecting the religion he once belonged to. So, I did some more digging. I don't think he's either. He is a *secularist* — he looks at the development of religion over time and concludes that it has morphed into ideological secularism. He doesn't take a stand for or against religion; he just supports the idea that it has morphed into something different in this day and age."

I thought this was a remarkable insight. *I'll need to do a little more investigation into this Harari guy.*

"For those of you who have not read his books," Father Riggard restored his control of the conversation, "He's kind of an anthropologist who looks at how religion and society have evolved over time. For instance, he has a book called 'Sapiens' that explains how we evolved our religious beliefs. Then there's '*Homo Deus*,' a discussion of the direction world societies are heading in. And then there's his *'21 Lessons*' book. In that, he

provides advice on how to live in what he views as a changing, secular world."

Father Riggard paused for a moment to recall what Harari had written in his latest book. "And last year he published a book called *'Nexus'* that goes into how information is shaping everything in society, including religious beliefs and religious practice."

"I don't know how I missed his books," I responded, mystified by how they had slipped through the cracks. "I usually follow religious analysis literature pretty closely. But these books sound like they should also be discussed at the next Bishop's Council meeting."

"I've got all four Harari books, if you'd like," Father Riggard offered.

"Most definitely," I responded. "They sound like an interesting way to blend faith with our evolving secular world."

"I'll leave them outside your door later on today," Father Riggard promised. And he did.

Chapter 27: A Threat to Religion?

I read all of the Harari books before the next Bishop's Council meeting — and I, to be truthful, found them alarming. *If Harari is right*, I concluded, *the future of religion is in great peril!*

The Harari books paint a picture of societies evolving toward secularism, in which individuals become the centers of their own universes. In this world, it is our intellect that dictates our social behaviors. We make our decisions by gathering information, applying reason, and behaving socially based on our own analysis. The source of "authority" in this world is our own logic, supported by science. And in this secular world, morality is not conveyed by religion but instead built from social principles derived from secular information analysis. So, we develop a sense of empathy, fairness, and integrity not through Church guidance but on our own.

Religion, on the other hand, is not grounded in ourselves as the center of the universe, but rather in faith and in a higher power. In the religious world, God is the supernatural source of authority; God's wishes are made known to us through sacred texts and spiritual leaders. Our sense of morality is rooted in divine commandments and guided by the teachings of our religious leaders, including Jesus, Muhammad, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Confucius (Kongzi), and others.

In short, secularism guides our interactions with institutions and each other — it is a human-centric approach to the world influenced by social norms. Religion, on the other hand, is the belief in a higher power, a supernatural force that provides us with instructions on how God wants us to interact with and treat one another.

If we're not careful at this particular junction in time, I again thought, *religion could become obsolete*...

*

After breakfast, I headed back up to my room. As I did so, I tried to come up with a real-world example that contrasted secularism with religion. And I thought back to one of the reality shows that Olivia had done with her partner, Mary. It was their coverage of the U.S. Immigration situation.

In their Immigration reality show, Olivia and Mary discussed how outrageous and hypocritical the U.S. Immigration situation is. Olivia and Mary gathered facts and figures on arrest and imprisonment rates. They proved that Immigrants are not a drag on U.S. society in terms of welfare and healthcare, and they argued for more humane treatment of Immigrants.

But the way they argued their case against the maltreatment of Immigrants *combined* secularism and religion. From a secular perspective, they gathered information, interpreted it, and shared their interpretation with other members of U.S. society. But, in their own way, they brought a religious overlay to their show. In one episode, Olivia questioned why churches, temples and synagogues are not more active in preaching the words of God that call for the humane treatment of migrants, and an end to unnecessary cruelty. Core tenets of Christianity call for us to respect human dignity, to welcome the stranger — remember "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt..." And Olivia and Mary argued that it is our social responsibility to protect vulnerable migrants and avoid unnecessary cruelty. I think they should have said it is our *Christian* responsibility to do so.

In a more Christian context, Olivia and Mary emphasized what Jesus consistently discussed in his parables and teachings. If we are truly Christian, Jesus wants us to care for the poor, the displaced, and the powerless. Christian teaching also emphasizes that people are bound together in a moral community and should resist scapegoating and fear-based narratives (such as "*They're*

eating the dogs...). POTUS, in his infinite wisdom, accused immigrants in Ohio of "eating the dogs" during a presidential debate. The claim, according to officials in the municipality in question, denied that obscene, divisive claim.

*

I was a little tired from my long ride. So, I stretched out on my bed and pondered Stephanie's observation about media literacy. And I recognized that there is also a media literacy aspect to Olivia's and Mary's position on Immigration.

Yes, they took a typically secular approach to formulating their argument against U.S. immigration policy. They gathered information from a wealth of sources, interpreted it, and shared their findings with their digital community. But here's the thing. Were their sources of information unbiased? They claimed that the U.S. government is putting out misinformation and outright lying about what their ICE agents are doing. But how balanced were their sources of information? How close were they to the *truths* about a situation? This is why media literacy is so vital to our secular society. Our empirical decisions must be based on truths.

Chapter 28: The Church as an Information System

Our Bishop's Council meeting reconvened over in Braintree at the *Archdiocese of Boston Pastoral Center* on January 7th. This building is where the bishop resides, though he did not join us at this particular Council meeting.

The Bishop's Council comprises nine priests from various religious orders who discuss current church challenges and recommend how to address them to the Bishop. On this Council, there are three Benedictine priests, two Dominicans, two Augustinians, one Jesuit, and even a Pauline.

*

After reading all of Harari's books, I had formulated some ideas that I wanted to discuss with the Council. *There is little doubt*, I came to believe, *that the world is moving in a secular direction. Where churches used to be a primary source of information and guidance, churchgoers were now replacing the Church's functions by getting their information from the Internet, social media, and other sources. And, instead of Church guidance, they're using their own reasoning to determine who and what they believe in. If this is indeed the case*, I reasoned, *the new role of the Church should be to influence the decisions and beliefs of our followers — not necessarily just from the pulpit, but also via the Internet. Over the Internet*, I posited, *the Church needs to reposition itself as a source of Catholic information, provide guidance as a moral compass rather than dictate church doctrine, and stop measuring itself by attendance at services.*

I also concluded that the Church is facing the same problem as the voters of the United States. They've got millions of sources of information from a wide variety of sources — and it's now up to the individual to sort through that information and construct his or her view of reality. The Church has to become a relevant

provider of information and a guide, not a dictator, in matters of appropriate moral direction.

I then wondered: *If the Church became more of an information system, what would become of ritual? There has got to be some community, direct contact, and affirmation of our faith amongst our parishioners on a face-to-face basis. Are there alternative ways to offer rituals like Mass and the Sacraments?* There was a lot on my mind that I had to express at the Council meeting. So, how would I go about that?

Chapter 29: Floating It to the Bishop's Council

I prepared for the Bishop's Council meeting by drafting a PowerPoint slide show. I also brought copies of Harari's books as props.

*

I had asked for a large chunk of time on the agenda and was given it. I started by asking, "How many of you have read any of Yuval Harari's books?"

Five priests raised their hands. And the Paulist priest said, "And why do you ask?"

"I think he's got some important insights that may help us better frame our discussion on dwindling church attendance. For those of you unfamiliar with his books, they provide a roadmap for how religions can adapt to a changing digital world. I think Harari's messages have a direct bearing on how we can better reach our congregations."

My fellow priests were all ears...

"Let me recap." I offered. "And, for those who are familiar with him, feel free to chime in with your insights and observations."

I started. "Harari's book "*Sapiens"* covers the history of humankind from the Stone Age to the present. He discusses the evolution of religion, and he makes one critical observation: humans dominate the planet not because of our strength, but because of our ability to create and believe in *collective fictions*. Religion is one of those fictions."

No reaction, but clear interest. *So far, so good*, I thought.

"Harari's next book is *'Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow,'* I continued. "And this one is fascinating because it examines the trajectory humans are taking. He contends that we

are now focusing on *ourselves* as the gatherers and interpreters of information. The church, which as traditionally played that role, is losing influence in providing us with direction. This does not necessarily mean that humans are turning away from religion to other things. I see these as moral issues that the church should have a say in and provide guidance on — an opportunity to stay relevant and influential. If these are really society's goals today, we need to provide a moral path for reaching salvation using these factors."

I moved on to the next slide. "Harari's third book '*21 Lessons for the 21st Century*,' is mainly about how technology is impacting jobs, politics, and truth. He also discusses nationalism versus globalism in a connected world. And this is particularly interesting — he talks about *the rise of fake news and the fragility of democracy*. This was written eight years ago, but he is spot on with his observations. Phony news dominates the information scene, and democracy is under severe threat from the current regime. But fake news is also an opportunity for us. It is an opportunity to set the record straight, and a chance to provide guidance."

There was some mumbling, and a few disapproving looks; *things are about to become very interesting,* I thought...

"So, are you suggesting that the church be relegated to an information hub?" asked the Pauline.

I took a hard position. "Yes, I am," I declared. The mumbling ceased as I moved to the next slide to explain my vision.

"Allow me to explain how I see the Church moving forward for this century and many centuries to come," I opened. Harari's most recent book is titled '*Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI*,' which was published last year. In this book, he explores humanity's relationship with

information across history. One of his key points in this book is that *AI will be used to control information flows and provide either truth or non-truths*. He also discusses the tension between human cooperation and mass delusion, and I think this discussion has a direct bearing on American politics. If you think about the polarization that has taken place in the United States over the past few decades, it is a result of how information has been controlled and how it is presented, along with certain biases. But the key thing I learned in this book is that *AI will be used to drive information into society*. And that's the reason I'm bringing these books to your attention. Perhaps we should start focusing on doing the same. Maybe we should use AI to deliver our messages to our congregations and to non-Catholics. Perhaps tying our congregations to Mass, church pulpit lectures, and required Church attendance is not the right approach as we advance. Maybe we should be guiding in different ways."

I paused and looked around the room — and what I thought I saw was puzzlement. "I have just one more slide," I informed my Council of peers. And is my final, concerning, and, as a Catholic priest, it represents my greatest fear. Harari believes in something called 'humanism.' One of his key tenets is that *we are evolving a new 'religion' in which humanity is the ultimate source of meaning and authority*. He believes that human experience, emotions, and desires are the highest authority — not God, or gods, or external divine orders. This new 'religion' is manifested in ideologies like liberal humanism, socialist humanism, and evolutionary humanism, with humans and their political and ideological beliefs as the *new* religion."

I paused, looking up and down the table. "If we are to believe Harari, we've got a lot of work to do to remain relevant. We've got to use information systems better and improve our outreach to our congregations. We've got to find ways to augment secularism, to build our religion on top of it, to marry the two, such that if

humans continue to become human-centric, we can augment that experience with a religious, moral overlay that reflects Catholic values. We need to say '*it's okay to be secular*,' or '*it's okay to be a humanist*, but Christian understandings and beliefs should have a role in how you make your moral and ethical decisions because these beliefs came from a loving, merciful, compassionate, humble, and forgiving teacher and healer who associated with outcasts and was looking outward not inward to oneself.

*

I finished my presentation, and we spent the next hour discussing the Harari books. A few of the priests at the table had taken notes during my presentation. And all of the priests had gotten the message: *the world is changing*. *We, as priests, need to quickly adapt to that change if our Church and its beliefs are to remain relevant*.

We all agreed that we should present my Harari findings to the Bishop, with perhaps a recommendation on how to implement some of them to reach our congregations better.

Actually, I should say, we all agreed that "*I*" should present our findings to the Bishop. I had been chosen to lead the charge...

Chapter 30: The Phil Donahue Show

After Stephanie and I had returned home from my fundraiser speech and had talked a bit over martinis, Stephanie stayed up when I went to bed. She was kind of wound up about her media literacy idea and wanted to do some Internet research. She would have a lot to discuss with me the following morning.

*

The next day, I awoke uncustomarily late, at around 8 a.m. I lay in bed, not eager to get up and get going, which was unusual for me. But, as I lay there, my mind returned to the "*Phil Donahue*" thought I had had the night before, before I had drifted off to sleep. To be more specific, I returned to my thoughts on "*The Phil Donahue Show*."

From the 1970s through the 1990s, there was a controversial TV show called *The Phil Donahue Show*. Its format fascinated me. Donahue would pick a topic, usually something provocative, and have knowledgeable guests present opposing points of view. Topics included things like abortion, civil rights, consumer protection, domestic violence, atheism, homosexuality, and war. Talk about a powder keg. And, strangely, although we could discuss some of these topics amongst ourselves back then, in today's politically correct WOKE world, it's challenging to have conversations about these very same topics. The second you mention abortion, for instance, polarization kicks in...

As I lay there, I envisioned some of those shows. Guests would debate the subject at hand, and Phil would do something that I thought was both adventurous and very risky. He would wander through the audience with his microphone, seeking, essentially, general public feedback on the arguments the show's guests were making. Audience members were encouraged to express their opinions and were able to challenge the guests directly. Risky, yes — but it worked. Controversial topics were raised and discussed,

and differing opinions were shared, enabling the viewing audience to form their own after hearing both sides of the argument. *We are greatly missing this type of thing today,* I thought.

I continued to ruminate on the show. One thing that the show emphasized was quality over spectacle. It was an opinion show where some of the topics discussed could have precipitated fisticuffs, but Phil and his security team did a great job of managing the controversial discussions. He encouraged meaningful conversation — not shock value. And he used strongly opinionated guests, including boxers, activists, wrestling promoters, and others — all with clashing viewpoints. The show created a sort of entertainment tension amongst viewers.

As I pondered Donahue's approach to public discussion, I realized that his show was less about entertainment and more about fostering public discussion on pressing social issues. *If I do return to streaming*, I thought, *that should be my primary focus, and The Phil Donahue Show should be my model.*

*

When I finally got up, I went over to my desk, sat down, and put some of my thoughts into writing.

Chapter 31: Stephanie's Search Results

Stephanie's Internet searches revealed that Canada did not yet have a nationwide media literacy policy. She wasn't surprised by that. But she noted that various provinces have implemented their own media literacy approaches. And she discovered an organization that seemed to be leading the media literacy charge in Canada. It is a non-profit organization that partners with government entities and is committed to teaching Canadians to become media-literate.

This non-profit is called "MediaSmarts," and, to Stephanie's delight, when she visited the MediaSmarts website, she found extensive resources for teaching literacy courses. She discovered that self-guided lessons and self-directed tutorials were already available to help students identify media approaches that could relay false information. These publicly available courses would be a gold mine for Stephanie and me, should we decide to create a course for the College. We were surprised we hadn't heard of these resources before but realized that we are always laser focused on and consumed by our jobs as professors and researchers in our own specific fields.

Stephanie also found a 134-page PowerPoint presentation titled "*Break the Fake*" that would make an excellent starting point for an introductory class lecture on media literacy.

The more she dug, the more she found. She found resources for facilitators, including a workshop facilitator guide, tip sheets, and a tutorial on building a custom search engine.

During Canada's *Media Literacy Week*, she found "virtual and in-person workshops on various topics, such as coding, fact-checking, misinformation, and online risks. Notable events include "*The New Age of Digital Deception: What's Changed and How to Fight Back*" and "*The Voice of the Digital Citizen*." The week also promotes *Digital Citizen Day*, encouraging everyone to engage

and share responsibly in the digital world." It would be a piece of cake, she concluded, to construct a media literacy course for the College.

Just out of curiosity, Stephanie probed the media literacy content offered by the American government and institutions. Only 28 U.S. states have enacted or are considering media literacy legislation. *The U.S. appears to be well behind us with this initiative*, she thought.

By happenstance, Stephanie stumbled upon a site called the *Media Education Lab*. She again found a wealth of educational materials, lesson plans, books, MediaEd blogs, MediaEd podcasts, MediaEd Videos and so forth that could be used to build a media awareness class. And again, all for free.

Building a media awareness/media literacy class for the College would be pretty straightforward, she concluded. She would run this idea by our friend, Margarette, the Provost, when she got a chance.

Chapter 32: The Next Steps

Stephanie slept late that day, but heck, it was the week before Christmas, and classes were out, so why not?

When she eventually woke up and made her way to the kitchen, I joined her, and we decided to have a Tim Horton-type breakfast: we made our version of Timmy's *Maple Bacon Cheddar Croissant* using store-bought flaky croissants loaded with maple-flavored bacon, my special fluffy eggs, and melted cheddar cheese. I also cooked Canadian bacon and some home fries. We didn't have any orange juice, but we had lemonade, and that would just have to do.

I have a unique way of making home fries. I take leftover potatoes, dice them up, and put them in a ceramic-coated frying pan. I don't put in any butter or oil. I just fry them as is. And they get crispy, even though they're not cooked in any sort of oil. That is because I think what happens is that the potatoes are naturally starchy, and that starch kinda gets roasted, even turning a little crusty. I sometimes throw in a little sausage, or a small, diced onion, and/or thinly sliced celery. And I finish off my creation by applying a generous dose of "*Old Bay*" seasoning. My "home fries" are excellent, even if I do say so myself...

*

I had just finished pouring a second cup of hazelnut coffee, and I was primed and ready for our forthcoming discussion. We took our seats at the breakfast table, ready to discuss our respective plans: my potential streaming show and her potential college-level media literacy course.

"Let's go!" I said eagerly. I paused.

"So, what needs to be done to launch your effort?" she asked.

I looked at my notes. "My objectives are: 1) contact Tito to find out whether we can still reach my base; 2) contact a friend of mine back in Bangor, his name is Alex Monroe, he's a reporter for PCPTV, a digital-first streaming network. He's the one who got me the audio/video people to produce our reality show, so I want to contact him to see if he wants to get involved in this." I paused and looked again at my notes. "And, 3) I think I'm going to need some money to get this done. I'll have production costs and probably some honoraria to pay. I'm going to look around for donors. I've already met some previously when I was doing the reality show."

By way of explanation, PCPTV is a streaming "digital-first" news outlet. PCPTV differs from traditional broadcast news providers in that it prioritizes online audio and video news delivery over print and broadcast outlets. This means that instead of focusing on newspapers, broadcast or cable TV, or radio as primary distribution methods, digital-first outlets use websites, mobile apps, social media, podcasts, and video streaming as their primary news delivery tools. Don't look now, but this is the direction broadcast news is heading. It's an evolutionary step toward the next generation of how people will receive their news. I wondered if Alex had any reporter friends in Canada who could help draw attention to my new show.

*

As we continued with our breakfast discussion, Stephanie shared her overnight media literacy research findings with me. Most importantly, she thought she had discovered the resources she needed to teach her course.

"So much of your course syllabus is already done?" I asked.

"It looks that way. I'm going to print some of what I found and set up a meeting with Margarette and get her thoughts on my delivering a media literacy course next semester."

"Excellent. I can't wait to hear what she has to say." I then shared my "*Phil Donahue*" idea with Stephanie, and she loved it.

"You know, of course," she advised, "that, with today's technologies, you won't have to have a studio to do what you're proposing. You could orchestrate the whole thing like one big Zoom call, switching to each speaker's perspective, ending when done, then moving to the next speaker and repeating. Then you could randomly select audience members to ask questions and receive responses from the show's guests. If you do that right, it could greatly limit your show expenses."

She's already giving me helpful suggestions... She doesn't want to do the show, but she's "into" it. It will be great to have her as a sounding board...

Chapter 33: The Tito Check-in

Later that day, I called Tito Candelaria. Tito is a former student of mine; he became my social media guru when I did my reality show.

Tito is a little guy, but with big shoulders and arms. He stands about five-foot-five inches tall, with dark, straight, shiny hair and brown eyes, a Latino nose, and an angular face. Tito may be short, but he sure is stocky — with the arms of a bodybuilder and a solid body core. Only, he doesn't belong to a gym and doesn't lift weights. His musculature appears to come to him naturally. At five-foot-five, I think he weighs about a hundred and seventy pounds — so he's a bit overweight according to medical charts. Or perhaps it is muscle weight. My overall assessment of Tito's build is that I think he's built like a great big fire hydrant...

*

Tito is brilliant at social media. He knows how to maximize media across social platforms, including *Facebook* for its broad demographic reach; *Instagram* for visual storytelling through short-form reels; and *YouTube* for releasing political commentary, interviews, and educational content. He also knows how to use *X* to share real-time updates on our progress, tag journalists, and join political discussions. He uses *TikTok* to appeal to our target audience, so we used to use it to reach Gen Z listeners with a slew of short, punchy videos. For my show, we also used *Reddit, LinkedIn, Nextdoor, Telegram, Mastodon* and *BlueSky*. I was hoping Tito could become involved in doing the same for my new streaming project.

*

As I approached Tito, however, I was hyperaware that this was going to be a lonely Christmas for him. His father, Manuel "Manny" Candelaria, had been scooped up by *Immigration and*

Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers in Bangor in the Spring, had had been sent to the notorious CECOT prison in El Salvador. After having a heart attack and receiving no medical attention, Manny died there. And now Tito was all alone.

*

I reached Tito by phone at his apartment near Orono, Maine, and he seemed level, not depressed, but not overtly vibrant. Just level. After our initial greetings, I told him what I was up to, and I think I noticed an uptick in his demeanor. He loves these kinds of Internet/social media/streaming challenges, and he was thrilled that I had contacted him to seek his opinion.

"You know, Professor," Tito intimated, "you're going to need some funding for production expenses." He has always referred to me as "Professor."

"Yup," I replied. "And I intend to pay you for your assistance, too. Do you have any ideas on how I can fund this?"

Tito thought for a moment. "*Crowdsource* is my first reaction. Get people who are sympathetic to resolving disputes actively involved in funding. People from both sides of the debate," Tito suggested.

Crowdsourcing my stream had been my first reaction, too. But I had determined that crowdsourcing as a long-term model would not work. Crowdsourcing tends to be spontaneous and temporary — it may help get my launch started, but it was unsustainable in the long term.

"Or, what about a subscription service where people pay a membership fee to gain access to your show?" Tito suggested.

I had considered that, too, and had considered that model prohibitive. Many of the people I'm trying to reach don't have the spare funds to pay subscription fees.

"You know," Tito advised. "Perhaps you might want to talk to Alex about this. He knows how his station generates revenue. Maybe he can come up with funding solutions for you."

I told Tito I planned to call Alex next, but I had one more important question for my Internet guru. "So," I asked, "do you think we can revive our former reality show base and get them interested in this new series in a new format?"

Tito carefully considered his answer. "Well, Professor," came his considered response, "most of your base was students, and they may have moved on." That was his way of saying most of them had graduated, had jobs, and were likely interested in other things, and other entertainment options. "Also, I think you're trying to reach a different audience, too. So, I think we're going to have to sit down, identify our audience or audiences, and then evolve a plan to reach them."

"Agreed," I replied. "Hey, look, I gotta go," I said. I suddenly had another idea that might add some additional cheer to his situation. "I'll call you right back."

"I'll be here," Tito replied. He had nowhere else to go, and no one to share his forthcoming Christmas with...

Chapter 34: The Invite

I knew that Stephanie had gone out shopping, so I called her at the mall to ask a favor. Bear in mind that Stephanie's house has eleven rooms, including four bedrooms. And she and I were using only two of those bedrooms. So, I asked, "Steph, how would you like to meet my friend Tito?"

"Tito," she answered quizzically, then remembered, "the Internet/social media student you used to work with?"

"The one and the same."

"I'd love to meet him. Is he coming to St. John?"

"I'd like to invite him," I replied. "He is in Orono now," I said, "but here's what I'm thinking. I could drive down there, talk with my reporter friend Alex Monroe while in Bangor, and then bring Tito back up here with me for Christmas." I let that sit.

Stephanie was already aware of Tito's father's situation; Mary Shelley, Alex, and I had covered it during our reality show, and she had seen that episode.

"That poor boy," Stephanie answered after giving my idea only momentary thought. "You need to bring him up here, and by all means, he can sleep in one of the spare bedrooms."

Exactly the answer I was looking for. I immediately called Tito back and squared away the offer.

*

Tito's spirits lifted. He was noticeably excited when I invited him to St. John for Christmas. I was excited, too. I couldn't wait to show him my new hometown, and I was eager to explore more streaming startup options with him...

Stephanie was pleased, too.

Chapter 35: The Alex Check-in

Next, I called Alex, and, as usual, he was in the midst of a story and on deadline. We exchanged greetings and set a meeting for just before Christmas. We would catch up then.

I would pick up Tito after visiting Alex so I could have a private discussion with Alex. Long story short — Alex and my former reality show partner, Mary Shelley, are living together. And she and I did not have an amicable breakup. I missed Mary, and I wanted to know if there was anything I could do to repair our relationship. Alex would level with me.

*

I left St. John early on December 23rd and arrived at Alex Monroe's place around 11 a.m. I've known Alex for about five years. He's 42 years old, about twenty years younger than I, and he looks like George Reeves, the actor who played Clark Kent in the 1950s TV show *The Adventures of Superman*. Alex is handsome as hell; fair complexion; strong, classical jawline; high, smooth cheekbones; bright, expressive blue eyes; he's got that "all-American" idealized look about him. I half expect that someday I'll see him enter a closet as Clark Kent and emerge as *Superman*, then take to the skies...

I knew Alex for a few years before Mary and I did our reality gig together, but when we started our show, Alex worked with Mary and me, helping with story creation, editing, and videography. He also promoted our work on his media outlet station.

I called upon Alex first and foremost to catch up, and, secondly, to get his insights on the new show I was planning. And, if I could tactfully bring it up, I wanted to know if Mary had forgiven me yet.

*

We did the cursory "*Great to see yous — how have you been?*— and "*What have you been up to?* stuff. But it was when I asked the "*What's new in your life*?" question, man did I get an earful!

"So, what have you been up to?" I asked.

Alex sighed. And the floodgates opened...

Chilling news. "Mary and I have had external 'troubles.' We have both been getting stalked by one of my former girlfriends, Marnie Streeter. We've pulled a restraining order on her, but we still have this creepy feeling that she's nearby, and we're being observed..."

"You know that's a mental illness of sorts," I pointed out.

"I know," Alex said, "but she's stalking us. I think she's dangerous. As in mentally and physically dangerous."

Alex then shared his background information on the Streeter situation with me. He admitted, as I had suspected, that he had seen her for a short period of time and had ended the relationship using his usual excuse: too much work to do. Apparently, Ms. Streeter is not willing to take "no" for an answer — and the fact that Mary is now living with Alex has, seemingly, sent her over the edge.

"Will the restraining order work?" Alex questioned, then followed with "we'll see..."

I expressed my sympathy and empathy for his situation. Creepy...

*

The saga continued.

I asked, "Speaking of Mary, how is she?"

"To be honest, Professor, she's still miffed at you. I don't think you'll be breaking that iceberg anytime soon," Alex replied, honestly.

"I'm truly sorry to hear that," I responded. And I was genuinely sorry. I had been the source of the problem.

We talked a little bit about how the Alex/Mary relationship was going, how she liked her new teaching job, and how she liked his dog: MLPITA (major-league-pain-in-the-ass).

"Mlpita loves her!" Alex smiled. "He snuggles up behind her knees at night when we go to sleep. He's quite the suck-up."

I laughed at that. Mlpita really is a significant league pain in the ass — he's always up to something, finding new and different ways to get in trouble. And Alex, a never-recovered widower, was thrilled to have finally found someone.

But his short moment of "upbeatedness" ended with my next question: "So, how's work?"

*

Alex's woes continued.

"How's work? I'd say the *shit has really hit the fan* at PCPTV," Alex informed me. The angst returned to his voice. "I've got my hands full; I'm facing the loss of my job. The current POTUS regime has targeted me. Apparently, I'm some sort of dissident who needs to be silenced, so they've intervened with PCPTV executive management asking for some changes to be made in our streaming service reporting."

"Whattttt?" I said in surprise.

Alex paused, then told me what was going on. "The administration has got a playbook on how they can interfere with the streaming news media, and *Step 1* has just started..."

As the son of a newspaper reporter, I have a strong appreciation of the news reporting process and of the importance of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. And what was happening to Alex was a clear violation of freedom of the press.

When Tito's father was abducted by ICE and deported, there had been something fishy going on behind the scenes. Alex, Mary, Tito and I wondered: *How had ICE found Manny, a local produce business owner? Why did they choose him?*

We all suspected that there was something rotten in Denmark. Despite speaking perfect English and running a local business for almost two decades, he had been identified as an illegal immigrant. His capture was just too coincidental.

Alex, Mary, Tito, and I all believed that Manny's capture was some sort of political retribution aimed at Tito for making Mary and me so wildly popular on our reality show. Tito was the brain behind our social media program — and that made him a target in the eyes of the current regime. But Tito could prove his citizenship with a birth certificate and Social Security number. As a validated U.S. citizen, he couldn't be targeted by ICE. But his father could be.

We all came to believe ICE officials targeted Manny Candelaria in retribution for Tito's assistance to our political causes. We believed that this was not happenstance; it was not a by-chance ICE capture. It was targeted.

*

Alex explained why he was in trouble with the feds. "I tracked her down," Alex started when we sat in his living room. "I tracked down the bitch that turned Manny in — and I did an exposé on her. She's a state senator, and I exposed her."

I was shocked. *How had I not known of this*? Granted, I had been preoccupied with the goings-on at my College, and I was no longer a local, but I had totally missed what Alex had done. And it had had serious consequences. I rebuked myself; I should have been on top of this.

The thing about Alex is that he has a strong moral streak. When a wrong is done, like Don Quixote, he'll fight the perpetrators until he achieves satisfaction. It was this moral streak that led Alex to cover my anti-POTUS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policy, and it was this moral streak that led him to stream a series about the injustice done to Manny Candelaria.

"So," Alex started, "I published my *Missing Manny* series of streams on PCPTV. You saw all of those, right?"

"I did. They were masterful," I complimented him. "You really showed how unfair the system is. And you implicated the administration in Manny's death."

"Yeah," Alex replied, "well therein lies the problem. I ticked off a *Republican* Maine state senator due to that immigration coverage — and she was the one who helped get Manny arrested."

"You found out who was behind that?" I said in disbelief.

"Initially, I got a tip that a woman legislator was involved. But which one — and was she a member of the State Senate or State Legislature? In Maine, there are 15 women in the Senate and 60 in the House of Representatives. So, I had a big list to whittle down."

"Although women make up over 40% of Maine's legislative body," Alex continued, "Of that number, only 15 are Republican. So that narrowed my search for the rat down considerably," he told me.

"So, I asked myself the following question: '*How many of these women are MAGA Republicans – the kind who are blindly loyal to POTUS and would serve to ingratiate themselves with that slimeball leader*? The answer: one State Senator, and four Representatives."

"Those are my targets," I decided. Now, how am I going to determine which one did it? More sleuthing was required."

Alex paused and reached for a transcript he had placed on his living room coffee table. "This is what I said..."

*

I read what he had streamed.

"In a previous story, I had reported on the ICE capture of a local businessman, Manuel Candalaria, a produce store owner in Bangor. I also reported on his suspected death at the CICOT prison in El Salvador. We have asked ICE for confirmation of his well-being, but they have refused to respond to our inquiries.

Subsequently, we spoke with several former Venezuelan prisoners from CICOT who had been released to Venezuelan custody, and two of them claimed to know Manny. They claim that he had died and had been cremated and dumped at the prison's graveyard, El Monton del Basura; translated, this means 'The Mountain of Garbage.'

These Venezuelans also revealed the conditions of torture and neglect within the prison. Prisoners, they claim, are regularly beaten senseless and tortured. They vomit on themselves. They urinate on themselves. And the beating incessantly continues."

"As I continued to investigate the capture of Manny Candelaria, I spoke with members of our birth records department in Bangor. These records are kept at the City Clerk's office on the first floor of Bangor City Hall and go all the way back to the 1700s. At the

City Clerk's office, I learned that there had been several requests for Manny's birth record, all signed by Capitol Clerks representing Republican, MAGA State Senator Vesper Hale."

Alex paused. *"I cannot prove her direct involvement, but I thought I'd bring this to the attention of the listening and viewing public."*

"The one that," I started to say, but Alex cut me off.

"Yes, the one who constantly promotes the MAGA agenda here in Maine. She's anti-DEI; anti-immigrant; a religious Christian Nationalist fundamentalist; and a strong POTUS supporter. I used the City Clerk's request agenda to peg those Capitol Clerks to her."

"So, I take it there has been some federal government blowback on your report," I said.

"Blowback? They have come after me directly, and PCPTV as a whole. But they're being very cagey about it," Alex continued. They've given us the 'regulatory knock.'"

"The what?" I sought an explanation. And Alex provided it.

Chapter 36: The Regulatory Knock

"Here's the skinny," Alex explained. "Unlike broadcast networks, the *Department of Justice* does not have regulatory control over digital-first networks. We're streamers, not broadcasters. Unlike the networks, we're not subject to Federal Communications Commission oversight. So, you'd think the PCPTV would be safe from federal government interference. Right?"

I nodded my agreement, and Alex continued.

"Well, they can't go after me like Kimmel and Colbert, whose networks can be monitored and regulated by the FCC. But what the *Department of Justice* can do is make PCPTV's life miserable in other ways. And they fired their first volley last week."

As I listened, I had a sense of impending doom. Yet again, the government is infringing on the freedom of the press, a fundamental freedom in free societies, and one of the first targets of dictatorships.

Alex continued. "The *FCC* and the *Department of Justice* cannot supervise us; we don't have to have a license, and they can't overtly attempt to control our content." Alex paused a moment to let that sink in. "But they can use various laws to bother us. They can allege criminal activity and besmirch our reputation. They can seek wiretap or digital-interception warrants, which slow news sources and whistleblowers from contacting us. They can launch investigations for copyright violations, preventing news from being released until they clear it. There are all sorts of things they can do to unwarrantedly damage our business."

I was already familiar with what Alex was describing. It is informally called "*Regulation by Prosecution*." However, I had never heard it called the "Regulatory Knock" before. Regulation by Prosecution means that the Department of Justice can use existing business laws to control digital-first networks. And

existing laws, thereby, become a form of regulation. It is not a regulation like the FCC performs, but it has the same effect. It serves to stifle news organizations.

I was also aware that the Department of Justice's official policy calls for an end to the "*reckless strategy of regulation by prosecution*" and orders prosecutors to stop using criminal cases to "*superimpose regulatory frameworks on digital assets.*" An April 2025 memo from the Deputy Attorney General, entitled "*Ending Regulation by Prosecution,*" calls for an end to the practice. Agents have been instructed to focus instead on apparent fraud or criminal misuse. So, what Alex was telling me was that DOJ agents have found a way to creatively focus on fraud or criminal misuse by alleging violations of the law. That is blatantly *Regulation by Prosecution.*

"So, what have they done so far?" I asked.

"Nothing overt, but plenty by insinuation. They are applying pressure indirectly, procedurally — through investigations. They're never outright about trying to control us," Alex said. "They're sneaky and backhanded with their controls."

"Wait a minute, Alex," I interrupted, "who's *they*?"

"The Department of Justice. Because I reported on a MAGA state senator, they've increased scrutiny on our company. Because I embarrassed her, and finger-pointed her out, they've decided to increase pressure on PCPTV to go after me — and they are trying to limit the company's reporting to stories that don't contradict the government's 2025 narrative."

"They can't do that," I said. "It's against your First Amendment rights." I cited the exact phraseology. "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press..."

"They're doing it," Alex lamented. "And now my job is at risk..."

Chapter 37: The Council Spokesman

"Father Lucien," Father Acosta had said at the end of our mid-January Bishop's Council meeting, "we'd like you to deliver our Bishop's Council findings to the Bishop next at the end of the month."

We usually presented a summary of our weekly *Bishop's Council* meeting to his excellency every month, and, apparently, this month it was my turn.

I assented. Then I reviewed, in broad terms, what I would relay to the Bishop.

- We believe that measuring church "attendance" is the wrong way to measure the faith commitment of our parishioners.
- We all believe that we should talk with a number of parish "*focus groups*" comprised of parishioners of all ages, to see where they are primarily getting their news, and how they are receiving church guidance. If we could figure out their sources of information, we could better design our outreach to them, we reasoned.
- We recommend a strong focus on establishing a "*media literacy*" campaign. We recommended this for two reasons: 1) we want to wean our parishioners off of specific untrustworthy sites if they are using them, and 2) steer them toward trustworthy sites. Steering them toward Catholic sites is not necessary; steering them toward honest sites that present a balanced view of the world is far more desirable.

The bottom line: in today's Internet world, we need direct, targeted outreach to individual parishioners to reinforce church doctrine and inform them of church events. We need to show them that Jesus' teachings, and actions tried to counteract the

government's positions and the followers of the government of his time. Jesus avoided being a political revolutionary against Rome and instead urged a counter-cultural, moral life centered on love and service, rather than focusing on the moral failures of the occupying government.

*

I expected the topic of *existing* Internet Church outreach to come up in my Bishop discussion. The Catholic Church currently supports EWTN (*The Eternal Word Television Network*). It circulates globally, offers live TV news, and features news from the Catholic News Agency, the National Catholic Register, and other outlets under its umbrella.

And bear in mind that, in Boston, or more precisely in Watertown, we have a station known as *The Catholic TV Network*, or, as it is commonly known, just *Catholic TV*. The Bishop is very involved in and endorses that content. This station, now distributed in 16 U.S. states and the U.S. Virgin Islands, focuses on Catholic educational and inspirational programming. There are talk shows, devotional programs, catechetical question-and-answer programs, musical shows, entertainment and variety shows, and youth programs. Masses at various cathedrals are also broadcast live and are streamed.

In short, if I am asked why these outlets do not suffice as the Catholic Church's outreach to our congregants, I will point out that their formats do not reach everyday Catholics — only the more zealous ones. They appeal to Catholic conservatives; older Catholics, not younger Catholics; and to our own religious communities. Every day, American Catholics, I will contend, want their news targeted for their specific locale: the United States, and they want even further granularity: make the Catholic news germane to my community.

Chapter 38: The Bishop's Advice

Back at Boston College, I scheduled a meeting with Bishop Alistar Donnely on Thursday, January 29th. And before that meeting, I had done some research into how information is pushed over the Internet. So, I now understand the concept of information "bots."

The meeting went exactly as I expected. I presented our key finding that measuring church attendance was likely not the best way to assess our parishioners' faith commitment. I presented our idea to conduct focus groups to examine how our parishioners receive information and to identify new ways to reach them.

Then I shared my idea about the importance of media literacy. I said: "Steering them toward Catholic media sites is not necessarily the best way to reach our congregants. I'm looking into other ways to reach out using the Internet as a means to engage with them directly."

*

As I had expected, he asked, "What about Catholic TV? They do an excellent job relaying and reinforcing Catholic messaging."

I replied, "Yes, they do, your Excellency. But here's the thing: very few Americans that I know get their news from Catholic TV. Americans are getting their local news from local broadcast stations or from local Internet feeds. And they are getting their national news from national news broadcasts or Internet feeds. And, incidentally, these feeds are being chosen by bots using algorithms to target readers and listeners. " What we need to do," I suggested, "is create local content that uses bots to target our audiences, so they get a feed or two every day from us that is relevant to their specific parish." Keep them informed on the days Eucharist will be available; tell them about weddings; about funerals; inform them of any planned social gatherings and

fundraisers, etc. — you know, parish news tailored to our specific parishioners..."

"Interesting point of view," the Bishop responded. "And how would you go about creating such an environment?"

"I'd start by figuring out the exact audience I am trying to reach," I answered. I then took a page from Stephanie Pelletier, whom I had met in St. John just before Christmas. "I met a Sociology professor a few weeks ago who pointed out that to change people's minds, you need to understand their identity. Are they rural, with rural values? Are they religious — and, if so, are they moderate or centrist or extreme? Are they working class, and do they feel included in mainstream society? You need to reach people on a community level — no matter where and what their community is."

I paused for a moment, then also pointed out, "She also said you need to reach out to them with people of their own ilk, their family members, their church groups, their bosses, etcetera."

"So, you don't think we know who our exact audience is?" the Bishop asked. He seemed a bit dubious.

"I think we know some of them — we see them when they show up at church," I answered. "But I think we don't know those who are not showing up at church. We've been losing touch with them — or have already lost touch with them."

The Bishop considered my response, then nodded his agreement. "I know, Father Lucien, that we have to do a better job reaching out to our parishioners, and that we're losing touch with them." He paused and steered the discussion in a different direction: "Two things. Tell me more about these bots and algorithms; and tell me more about what you mean by 'media literacy.'"

"Okay," I replied. "Let's start with 'bots.' Bots are short for robots. But they're software programs that are designed to perform automated tasks. They can help customers with inquiries, crawl the Web and gather data for search engines, and perform all sorts of other repetitive tasks. But here's the danger in the way they are being used. They are being used to post tons of content on specific topics, and this volume of information tricks algorithms into thinking a subject is "trending." They artificially amplify certain narratives; make fringe ideas look mainstream; and worst of all, they drown out human conversations."

"And how does this apply to what you're recommending?" the Bishop asked.

"It means our Catholic messages are not being found and delivered — others, who use bots more effectively, are winning that news distribution battle."

"So, what specifically needs to be done to fix this situation?" the Bishop asked.

"I'm still working on that, Your Excellency, but I think it involves finding some serious Internet technical talent to handle our message distribution. And that will likely involve a cash infusion."

The Bishop considered my answer. "Do you have any Internet consultants in mind?" the Bishop asked.

"Before I get started searching for Internet talent, I wanted to see if you liked the overall idea," I replied.

"I do, Father Lucien. "I like it very much." The Bishop was pleased with my Internet outreach idea, and I think a light went on in his head regarding using my Internet outreach idea for other purposes. He revealed his other potential uses later.

The Bishop paused to consider the next step. "See if you can find someone with the expertise we need — and if you can, get me a cost estimate."

He paused. "I'll also make some calls on this. I'll check with the Cardinal on this matter, and I'll check with the Vatican. I'm sure the Vatican has dealt with this bot situation before, and I'd like to know their 'bot' position."

"I will," I promised.

*

We finished our "bot" discussion, and the Bishop went back to my media literacy idea. "So, tell me more about this 'media literacy' idea that you talked about?"

"It is simply this," I replied. "Now that you know what a bot is, there are ways to determine if a source is legitimate or fabricated. And that's where media literacy comes in. I'm advocating that we teach our parishioners how to identify misinformation. This will stop them from believing fabricated information. By doing this, we can help stop the spread of false ideas and narratives and, in doing so, enable them to make more informed decisions. And, best of all, it will teach them how to find '*Catholic-approved*" news sources that promote honest news, plus promote our doctrines and beliefs."

The Bishop asked, "Okay, so now I understand the use of media literacy as an education tool. So how would you accomplish this outreach?"

"You should also know that we have a list of all of our parishioners, and we can reach most of them electronically. So why not create an online church environment where we can reach out to them with local and national news that directly pertains directly to them? We would also encourage our parishioners to

join us at church once a month to celebrate the Eucharist, followed by social events. We need them to continue to attend and practice the rituals."

"I am intrigued, Father Lucien," the Bishop replied. "Let's each do some more homework and see if we can find a way to exploit this messaging opportunity. I agree, we've got to find new ways to better serve our congregants, so let's try something new."

*

I thought the meeting had concluded and gone well. That is, until I heard the Bishop's follow-on request: "*Father Lucien, let's have a discussion about the Christian messaging that you intend to deliver.*" He was about to reveal his alternative uses for my new outreach program.

Chapter 39: The Christian Nationalist Discussion

"Father," the Bishop started, "I very much appreciate the insights and recommendations that you have just shared."

The Bishop paused, and I respectfully replied: "Thank you, Your Excellency."

"Father," the Bishop continued, "I've got two other uses for such a platform if we go forward."

I was intrigued. I could tell his light had come on from our previous discussion, and he was about to reveal his potential alternative uses for my proposed platform.

"Father," he said in confidence, "I've got two pressing matters in mind that may be able to be addressed by your platform." He paused and looked me straight in the eye. "I have grave concerns about the new push toward Christian Nationalism in the United States, and I'm also greatly concerned about the inhumane immigration enforcement actions of the U.S. government. I think your proposed platform could serve as a vehicle to address these concerns."

"Interesting and intriguing," were my first thoughts. "How so?" I asked.

"Regarding Christian Nationalism, I know you understand Jesus' teachings. I believe you are aware that many churches are mixing politics and religion and, as a result, are not following Jesus' teaching, nor are they teaching their parishioners to observe Christian values and morals. Some of these churches are even prioritizing ideological beliefs over religion."

"I do understand that, your Excellency."

"So, if we are to correct this situation, how do we reach those who have forfeited their Christian values for nationalistic values?"

"Christian religion," I replied, "is about personal conviction to Jesus' teachings. One of his most fundamental teachings is about living a decent life so that a Christian can reach the *Kingdom of God*. Christians are to follow God voluntarily, not by force. We follow God through transformation and love."

"Yes," the Bishop responded, "we follow God voluntarily. So, what do *you* think about this Christian Nationalist movement?"

I wasn't really prepared for this line of questioning, but I did my best to present my thoughts and opinions. "What Christian nationalists typically want is for the United States to become a Christian nation. They believe the U.S. was founded as a Christian country and should return to its original Christian religion and values. This is not to say that other religions will not be tolerated, that Christians should have privileged cultural and legal advantages."

The Bishop smiled. He seemed pleased with my answer. "And where have we seen this 'privileged' religious position before?"

I thought for a moment, and then I remembered. Muslim countries offer preferred treatment for Muslims in Muslim countries. "Sharia law," I answered. "In Muslim countries, there are laws that advantage Muslims over other religions."

The Bishop nodded. "And what else do Christian Nationalists want?"

"Well, they want to reshape our laws to reflect their Christian values on things like marriage, sex, gender roles, abortion, and public education."

"Precisely," the Bishop stated. "And the key words that you used were '*their* Christian values.' And the thing is that *their* Christian values are often at odds with Jesus' teachings."

"For instance?" I asked.

"Well, this whole idea that Christians can dictate religious affinity at the expense of other religions flies in the face of Christ's warning not to engage in violence or coercion in God's name. Jesus rejected using force to advance religious goals, and in the Bible, he rebuked Peter for using a sword to defend him after the Judas betrayal. He taught that the Kingdom spreads through witness, not through domination."

The Bishop paused, then asked if I had any other opinions on Christian Nationalism. "So, what else is there about Christian nationalism?" he queried.

I thought for a moment. "Well, there's this concept that America's 'real' identity is tied to Christianity — and when we get away from Christian values, our country declines morally."

"That's what they believe," the Bishop confirmed. "And they also believe that the dividing lines between church and state should be reevaluated. They want to reinterpret our laws such that the state can promote Christianity and Christian religious themes."

I had just finished reading an article noting that, over the past few months, the Kennedy Center, a federal entity, has offered free screenings of the animated film *The King of Kings*, a movie for children with strong Christian messaging. And they added "*A Soulful Christmas*" to their Christmas show schedule. The movie features extensive gospel music and emphasizes the religious meaning of Christmas. And other Christian-themed films are also on the horizon. This article appeared to confirm the Bishop's assertion that the separation between church and state is becoming blurred.

"So, what I'm seeing is that their assertions are theologically incorrect; their actions represent a threat to religious freedom; they are distorting the Gospel; and with their chosen demi-god,

they're practicing a form of political idolatry," the Bishop observed.

He paused, then continued. "Now here's the other thing I'm seeing. Some of the members of our congregations are actually buying into this Christian Nationalist view of the world. I think we've got to get our congregations to understand how these beliefs are contrary to the teachings of Jesus. The message that our parishioners need to hear is that God's Kingdom is not about land, it's not about armies, it's not about laws enforced by police powers — and our religion should not be controlled by external political leaders. It's about *no* borders, *no* armies, *no* political capital, no single ideology, no coercion. Would you agree?"

"Wholeheartedly," I affirmed.

"So, how do we use Jesus' teachings to deal with Christian Nationalists?"

I paused for a moment to think that one through. "I think that Christ provided the answer when he was asked a trick question about paying taxes to the Romans by conniving Pharisees. If he had advised his Jewish followers to pay taxes to the Romans as a primary responsibility, he would have become deeply unpopular for advocating tribute. If he had said 'don't pay those taxes,' he could be arrested for rebellion. So, he said, '*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*' His answer reframed the trick tribute issue, calling for his followers to follow their earthly duties, while also focusing on their relationship with God."

"Nicely stated," Bishop Donnelly agreed. "Let's make that one of the cornerstones of your outreach. '*You, as Christians, have secular responsibilities. But it is important to separate domestic politics from the Kingdom of Heaven, and to emphasize that*

Christianity spreads not by force, but by persuasion, transformation, and love.'"

I was totally surprised by the Bishop's suggestion. What he was suggesting was actually a formula for dealing with the Christian Nationalist scourge — but it had implications far beyond that for me. *He had just suggested a way to engage our congregations by showing them that they have secular responsibilities. Still, we need to make sure that the teachings of Christ complement their secularism.* An idea for how to conduct our outreach in different ways was starting to take shape.

I did not yet know how I would balance local outreach with political/religious discussions. Thank goodness I had eight other priests to work with on the Council. I told the Bishop that I would put that matter before them at our next meeting.

On his second matter, immigration, he would get back to me on what he had in mind after checking with the Cardinal on some of his anti-immigration policy ideas...

Chapter 40: The Airline Return Trip

After checking in with my reporter friend Alex in Bangor, I took a short ride over to Orono to pick Tito up. He was excited to see me again, and I him. He's a great kid, kinda like a son to me. I always enjoy being reunited with my fire hydrant friend.

As we started heading up to St. John, Tito informed me that he did not have a passport, but he had a *U.S. Passport Card*, which looks like a driver's license with an RFID on the back so border agents can scan your departures and arrivals.

"They say that this card is sound for entering Canada by car or bus," Tito assured me.

I knew the Canadians would accept that card. But I also expected that the U.S. border agents would give Tito a hard time coming back into the country because he is clearly of Latin descent. That's why I went down to pick him up, and why I will personally escort him back to Orono. I will be there at the border crossings with him, validating his U.S. citizenship and helping handle any problems that might arise...

*

I really enjoyed riding to St. John with Tito. We talked and talked and talked. He explained in great detail what we would need to do to produce my show, how we would distribute it on social media, and a few other ideas for monetizing it. Tito, I knew, would help me find my target audiences and put together targeted outreach for them.

As for Alex, I was bothered by what the current regime was doing to PCPTV and to freedom of the press in general. As a newspaper reporter, my Dad had instilled in me an appreciation of the importance of freedom of the press. "*Freedom of the press*," my Dad would say, *"is one of the structural pillars that*

keep a democracy honest, informed, and resistant to abuse of power." And now, an autocratic regime has set out to quell press freedom while encouraging and installing a state-based, highly biased, deeply unhinged news system.

Another thing about my father was that he reported the news in an unbiased manner, presenting both sides of the story. Fine, he didn't have to do that for an obituary or typical local news, but when it came to covering national stories, Dad was pretty balanced. I hope, with my new show, that I can find the kind of balance my Dad had always strived for.

*

On the eastward ride back to St. John, I cruised along Maine's "*Airline*," the same route that Father Lucien had taken westward on his way back to Boston. Like Father Lucien, I, too, had a lot of time to think about our discussion about doing another show. Unlike Father Lucien, however, I think that the road is named "*the Airline*" because it feels like you're flying – you go up and down steep hills, and you swoop across sweeping ridges, giving you the feeling that you're banking in an airplane.

Now, accompanied by Tito, we traveled along a stretch of the Airline, between the small towns of Aurora and Alexander, where you hit a rather desolate stretch of raw wilderness. In places, that wilderness is barren; in other places, it's heavily forested. Occasionally, you pass swampy areas. I always look for moose as I travel past swamps. Sometimes I see them.

Along the way, you'll see signs such as "*Entering Range 6*" or "*Leaving Range 7.*" These refer to historic land-survey divisions used in Maine's unorganized territories. These areas don't have town names; they're simply numbered, such as "T1" for township one or "R2" for Range two. I've named one spot *R2D2* in honor of the *Star Wars* robot...

*

It takes about an hour to travel that desolate stretch, and during that hour, I talked with Tito about the Alex situation.

Tito shared his thoughts. "First of all, he's a reporter and knows how to tell a story. His stories are excellent, especially his political coverage. Second, he has an amazing stage presence — he's young, handsome, articulate — and has a good speaking voice, deep in nature with expressive inflection. He would make a perfect emcee for your new show," Tito observed.

I also told Tito about Alex's situation with the "*Regulatory Knock*."

"Unbelievable," Tito responded. "What is the United States coming to?"

Tito paused before saying, "I am very sad that airing my father's story has led to serious work problems for Alex, I am truly grateful that he exposed the horror of my father's abuse to the American public."

"You might say that to Alex the next time you see him," I suggested. Alex, at this time, need to know that he is appreciated.

I posed a question to Tito. "Let's suppose," I speculated, "that Alex becomes interested in my new show. Do you think he'd be interested in moving to St. John, and do you think he'd be interested in helping me run my new show?"

"I don't know about getting him to move," Tito replied. "He's pretty into Mary, and she's anchored in Bangor, teaching classes. I think that would be a difficult undertaking."

I had a different take on Alex's situation, which I did not share with Tito. If Alex gets booted from PCPTV, I would think it would be difficult for him to find other reporter jobs in the

Bangor area. He would be a hot potato — and other news outlets would be cautious about hiring him. And that means he would have to find another reporting job elsewhere, as in "geographically elsewhere."

The more I thought about Alex's situation, the more I believed that moving him to St. John would be his ideal next step. First, the current regime cannot prevent him from relocating to Canada. Second, St. John is only three hours give-or-take from Bangor — so he could still maintain his relationship with Mary, though it would have to become a long-distance relationship. Third, I missed having him around; he's probably my best friend. We could explore New Brunswick and nearby Nova Scotia together. And his dog, Mlpita, could come along as well. And fourth, I know he would love the city of St. John and the surrounding Bay of Fundy region. I think having him work on my show and relocate to St. John would be a strong career move for Alex.

My plan for getting Alex to St. John hinged on how much pressure the current federal regime would continue to exert on PCPTV. At some point, as Alex had intimated, the streaming news station was going to fire him to get the Feds off its back. I would broach the idea of him moving to St. John once that happened.

Chapter 41: The Tito Visit

We arrived at Stephanie's place at around 4:00 p.m. on the day before Christmas Eve. That was 4:00 New Brunswick time; we lost an hour as we left Maine's Eastern Standard Time. Our phones immediately picked up the time change and added an hour as we crossed into the Atlantic Time Zone.

Stephanie would not be home when we arrived. She had headed up to visit friends in Fredericton and would return sometime in the early evening. We would have the place to ourselves for a while.

*

When I pulled into the driveway, Tito was awestruck by the Victorian mansion standing before his eyes. "Professor," Tito said, "just look at this place! It's beautiful, muy bonita!"

"Wait 'til you see the inside," I boasted, "and your room is palatial, it's fit for a king!"

"*No Kings*!" Tito insisted, as he grinned. He, too, had participated in the "No Kings" protests. "No hay reyes," he said. It translates to "No Kings" in Spanish.

*

"Let the tour begin," I declared as I led him up the front steps, opened the door, and we stepped into the "receiving room." "Stephanie has a name for all of the rooms in her house," I told Tito. "For instance, one is called 'the far bedroom.' Another is called 'the skinny room.' And still another: 'the kitchen...'

That brought a wry smile to Tito's face. He understands my sense of humor...

I started the tour by taking Tito, who was carrying his duffel bag, up to his room on the second floor. The stairway is wide, I'd say

about 4 feet, and Stephanie had carpeted it with a beautiful oriental, red-patterned runner. The railing was some sort of very dark wood, mahogany, I suspected.

At the top of the steps is a bathroom, a little off to the right, complete with a clawfoot tub and modern fixtures. "Your room is just over here," I said, as I led him into a 10X15 foot room that Stephanie had decorated with a quite bizarre wallpaper comprised of gold-and-black targets. She liked her decorating job — go figure. I always think that this bedroom captures the meaning of the saying "*there is no accounting for taste*..."

"This is cool," Tito announced enthusiastically as he deposited his duffel at the bottom of the four-poster canopy bed.

"Stephanie calls this bedroom her 'modern room,'" I told Tito. I didn't tell him that I secretly think of it as the "target practice" room...

The rest of Stephanie's house had been decorated in an authentic Victorian style, with crown molding along the ceilings, ceiling medallions above the light fixtures, a couple of stained-glass windows, and decorative molding around all the windows. The rooms feature deep, rich colors, with walls painted in burgundy, forest green, navy, and plum. Stephanie also had several other rooms that had been wallpapered in floral patterns. Strangely, she didn't have many gaudy, gothic, heavy, depressing paintings hanging on the walls, which would have typified the Victorian period. Instead, she had gone with a look I call "*hunt club chic*." Lots of pictures of stallions, thoroughbreds, horses and riders surrounded by beagles going off on fox hunts. And a few with horses in paddocks. She even had a few hunt club pillows with horse scenes embroidered on them. Tito made a whinny-naying sound as we passed maybe the eighth horse picture.

Stephanie also has a bevy of gorgeous, handwoven Persian rugs in half the rooms of her house, and she has a penchant for pillows, with dozens strewn about the place. Velvet throws, embroidered, patterned — you name it, she's got it.

Furniture-wise, she had inherited the place, replete with heavy, dark Victorian pieces with elaborate floral-patterned couches and chairs, as well as several tables and dressers with marble tops.

Tito was impressed. "You didn't tell me I'd be staying in a museum," he declared as we toured the final two rooms.

We ended our tour in the dining room, grabbed a few seats, and planned what to do with the fast-approaching evening. "I've got to show you the marketplace, the *Saint John City Market*. We can head over there and have some snacks," I offered, then added, and as long as we're there, I've got to show you our *Container City*."

"What's 'Container City'?" he asked.

"You'll see," I promised. "It's a special and unique village within the city of St. John."

"And is there any place to get a beer there?" Tito asked.

"I think we'll find someplace downtown to whet our whistles," I replied, knowing full well that there are several breweries in St. John, including *Bigtide Brewing Co.*, *Wasted Day Brewing*, and *Loyalist City Brewing*. And within 15-20 minutes outside of St. John there are also the *Foghorn Brewing Company* out in Rothesay, and *Tragically Hopped Brewing* in Quispamsis.

Chapter 42: Our Quick City Tour

The St. John City Market is probably my favorite place in St. John City. It's a beautiful old building designed in the Second Empire Loyalist style. It opened in 1876 and was actually chartered in 1785, making it the oldest continuously operating farmers' market in Canada. The building's architects designed the roof to resemble an inverted ship's keel, evoking Saint John's shipbuilding heritage.

As you enter the market, you're bombarded by colors. You'll find dozens of booths with fresh produce, local crafts, seafood, butchered meat, and baked goods. And you'll discover bric-a-brac galore, with porcelain figurines, miniature vases or teacups, trinkets, souvenirs, keepsakes, and decorative odds and ends. Local painters also have their paintings on display.

I took Tito to *Slocum & Ferris*, one of several eateries in the market. Slocum & Ferris has been around since the 1890s. They're mostly a breakfast/lunch place, but they were still open when we arrived, maybe because of all of the holiday traffic. Tito and I took our seats at the counter, and I made Tito order their famous dulse & egg sandwich — a real, authentic St. John treat. But, to be honest, I think he disliked it. He suffered through it anyway, but did not sing its praises. Anyway, I liked mine...

When we finished touring the market, we walked about a third of a mile, or, as the Canadians like to say, "about 500 meters," to the St. John's *Container City*. There were no bands playing that day; it was, after all, Christmas Eve, but Tito got the general idea of how much fun hanging out there would be. "I'm coming back here when the weather is nicer," he vowed.

After touring Container City, we made our way to the *Wasted Day Brewing Company*, located nearby on Water Street. We grabbed a few pints, talked some more about St. John's entertainment and

dining scene, and then headed home so that I could introduce Tito to Stephanie. We stopped to pick up a pizza on the way home.

*

We got home at around seven o'clock, and Stephanie's car was in the driveway. So I held the door as Tito carried the pizza in, and we marched straight to the back of the house, where the kitchen is. Stephanie was there to greet us.

Stephanie smiled her "welcoming smile" as Tito entered the kitchen, and I immediately performed the introductions.

"Stephanie Pelletier," I paused, "this is Fernando Rodríguez Iglesias Candelaria."

Stephanie looked confused. And Tito addressed that confusion.

"They call me 'Tito' for short," he grinned.

"And Tito," I smiled broadly, "This is Professor Stephanie Pelletier, your hostess and owner of this beautiful Victorian mansion."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Fernando Rodríguez Iglesias Candelaria," Stephanie also grinned, proud that she had remembered Tito's full Christian name.

"And you, too," came Tito's response. "But please — don't use my full name unless I'm in trouble," he asked, paused, and followed up with "or being baptized."

Stephanie was delighted by Tito's lightheartedness.

"I shall call you 'Tito,' then," she affirmed, still smiling broadly.

I assessed the situation and added, "Anyone who remembers all that deserves a medal... or at least a drink..."

*

Over pizza and beer, I shared with Stephanie the results of my discussions with Tito, and I described the disheartening situation that Alex has found himself in. She, too, was disturbed by the Alex situation, and especially by the U.S. government's use of the *Regulatory Knock* to control the press.

I didn't tell her about the stalker situation because I wasn't sure whether Alex had told Tito about it yet. That is one creepy situation... I told her later that evening, when we had a few private moments together.

"That poor Alex," she responded, "he's really getting hit from all sides."

"That he is," I replied. "And I'm not sure what I can do to help him..."

PART II: A NEW PATH FORWARD

Chapter 43: My Business Case

On the ride up, Tito had given me some great ideas on how I could structure my show. And I was eager to sit down and put words to paper.

Stephanie and I got Tito situated on the Internet before we went to our respective bedrooms to catch some Z's. He's a bit of a night owl, so I suspected he would be surfing and researching until the early hours of the morning. And that meant that he would probably get up late. Probably really late. So, I was going to have a good block of time on Christmas Day to work on a business case for my prospective show.

*

On Christmas Eve, Stephanie had planned to go out for brunch with a few of our fellow professors, but I passed because I was hosting Tito. And because I passed, I would now have the entire morning to work uninterrupted on my business and production plans.

*

To start writing my business case, I had to take some time to figure out how to finance my venture. Funding can come from many sources. Sometimes there's grant money for endeavors like this; sometimes advertisers are willing to underwrite production costs; sometimes contributors send money; other times people buy subscriptions; and, to a much lesser degree, money comes in from GoFundMe.

The ideal situation for me would be to get my show picked up by a broadcaster or a major streaming service like Netflix, Apple, or Amazon. If that happened, I would be relieved of having to produce the videos, marshal staff and guests, and drive revenue. My role would then be to emcee the show and keep it moving forward in the right direction.

Given the show's controversial political nature, I concluded that securing a broadcaster or streaming service to pick it up was highly unlikely. Still, I had to try. If I succeed, such companies can reach vast audiences, both nationally and globally. The broader the distribution, the happier I would be. Also, there is some real big money to be made selling the right to a show. Look at Mrs. POTUS – she recently signed a multi-million-dollar deal with Amazon to distribute her documentary...

*

Failing to find a broadcast/streaming service willing to pick up the rights to my show, my fallback was *YouTube* for streaming distribution. When Mary and I ran our reality show, we generated significant revenue on YouTube through what they call *revenue per mile*, or RPM. RPM represents how much money you've earned per 1,000 video views and includes all revenue sources, such as ads, channel memberships, YouTube Premium revenue, Super Chat, and Super Stickers.

YouTube pays based on views, watch time, RPM, and niche. Some niches pay more than others. RPM for standard YouTube channels that offer small-scale/small audience "*how-to*" videos, for instance, can generate from $0.25–$4.00 per 1,000 views. But larger-scale productions, such as Mary's and my show, warranted a high rate of pay, so we earned a $10.00/thousand viewers compensation rate.

As an example of our situation with the previous show, start with our subscriber base. With Tito's help, we managed to land 50,000 subscribers! So, if we had 50,000 viewers, and all of them viewed a particular episode, and if we were compensated at the low end of the RPM scale, the 25 cents per thousand range, we might have earned about $12.50 per episode (50,000 ÷ 1,000 viewers = 50 RPMs; 50 RPMs X .25 = $12.50). Clearly, that would not work.

But for political shows like ours, YouTube was willing to pay us a much higher rate, so we earned $10.00 per thousand viewers. If all 50,000 subscribers watched an episode, we would get $500. But we never got all 50,000 subscribers to view our episodes. We averaged 25,000 viewers per episode, so we made $250 per episode (25,000 viewers ÷ 1,000 = 25RPM. 25RPM X $10 = $250). We split it, so we each took home $125 for our efforts. So, we were definitely not rolling in cash based on our shows.

We did, however, do pretty well with advertisers. That gave us another $1,000 per month to split. So, in general, we took home around $625 per episode. But we did two shows per month, raising our compensation to $1,250 per month.

Mary and I, however, weren't in the YouTube business to make money. We were in it to get our messages on DEI and Immigration heard. The $1,250 per month was just icing on the cake.

But then we had a falling out, and those extra earnings disappeared for both of us.

Chapter 44: Show Production

After I worked out my finance approach, I turned my attention to show production. There are four phases in show production.

1. The first phase is "*developmental*." That's the phase when the show is outlined, promotion plans are discussed, and the producers' backgrounds are outlined.
2. The next phase is "*pre-production*." This is the phase where you plan everything before recording begins. In this phase, you discuss casting, budgeting, scheduling, and set design.
3. Pre-production is followed, obviously, by "*production*." In this phase, you worry about how to handle the actual taping. In preproduction, you figure out where to put your people and possibly rehearse what they're going to say. In production, you actually record them. You've got to worry about lighting, the scene, the cutovers to other speakers or the emcee — things of that nature. This is when the visuals you want for your audience are created. And it has to look very professional.
4. The final phase is "*post-production*." In the production phase, you put your show together and record it. Post-production edits the clips, rolls in any graphics, mixes in any audio additions if needed — and voila, you've got the final product. Thanks to Alex, back in Bangor, we were able to use members of the PCPTV production staff to do the post-production editing. I was going to have to find new video production resources in the St. John area. I wondered whether I could involve the students at the College of New Brunswick in the post-production process.

*

In the developmental phase, I articulated the premise of my show: *To find a way, through panel discussion and audience participation, to mend the nation's political rift.*

I had to have a "*logline*," a one-sentence teaser to pique interest in the show. I wrote: *"When Republicans and Democrats join forces to bridge a divided nation, unlikely allies discover the cost — and the power — of unity."*

Following the logline, I outlined the show format, the emcee's role, the show guests' roles, and the commentator panel. I also organized a list of future episodes focused on better understanding why our government is failing to function, and what can be done to rectify the situation. Future show topics would include divisive issues, such as the government's approach to medical insurance and education, with a focus on finding common ground that leads to new legislation that addresses the needs of the American people.

The actual show production, with its various recording elements such as screen shots, graphics, and other visuals, would be best left to videography professionals. I would complete this phase of planning after I located a video production company.

As for post-production editing, I browsed our course offerings online and found several videography courses. Students can study media and film within the *Film, Media Arts & Cultures* discipline. Or they can gain hands-on production experience and ultimately earn a *Film Production Certificate*. Unfortunately for me, all the film courses were taught at the main campus in Fredericton, so if I were to use students to assist in production, I might have to travel up to Fredericton to use their studios. When school resumed sessions, I would pursue this matter with the teachers at the main campus.

Chapter 45: The Look Book

I now had a good idea of how I would produce my show.

The next step is to create a "*Look Book*." Once you've articulated your show's theme and format, that information needs to be placed into a Look Book. This short visual presentation serves as a quick "elevator pitch" that summarizes the show and its objectives, and can be used to attract funding, explain production requirements, and articulate the show format and flow. It is often used to describe a show to investors or streaming companies for a particular video project, hoping they will fund the show or purchase its rights. But it is also helpful for explaining the show to potential advertisers and partners who can assist with production.

A Look Book is exactly as it sounds. It is a short, quick-hitting overview of a given production project. It is brief, only six or seven pages that outline what the show is about, how it will be organized and staffed, and how it will be produced. In essence, it's a sales tool.

In the back of my mind, I imagined giving this pitch book to studios to fund my project and handle the actual show production. So, I included a contract granting a studio a temporary right to develop my idea if they so desired.

I would also need a formal plan to show videographers so they can figure out the logistics of shooting the show.

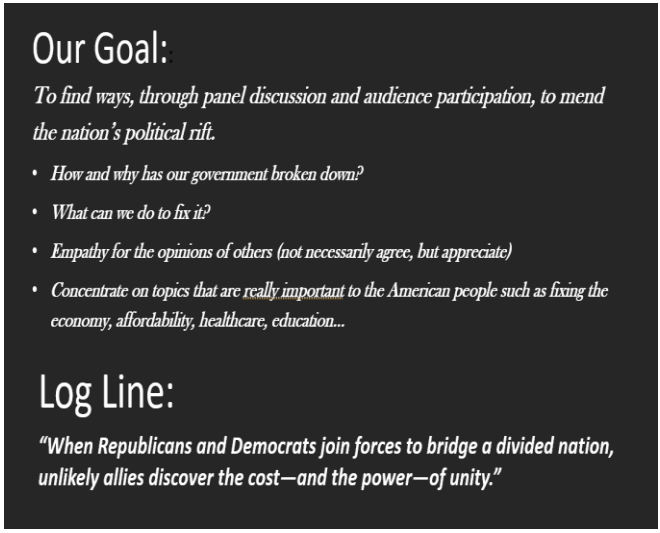
*

I started by designing the cover of my Look Book. My feeling was that it needed to, on one page, summarize what the show would be about. I decided to use AI to create a graphic with a Phil Donahue lookalike interviewing show guests and speaking with members of the audience. Next, I had AI generate a panel of commentators, people who would be tasked with analyzing what

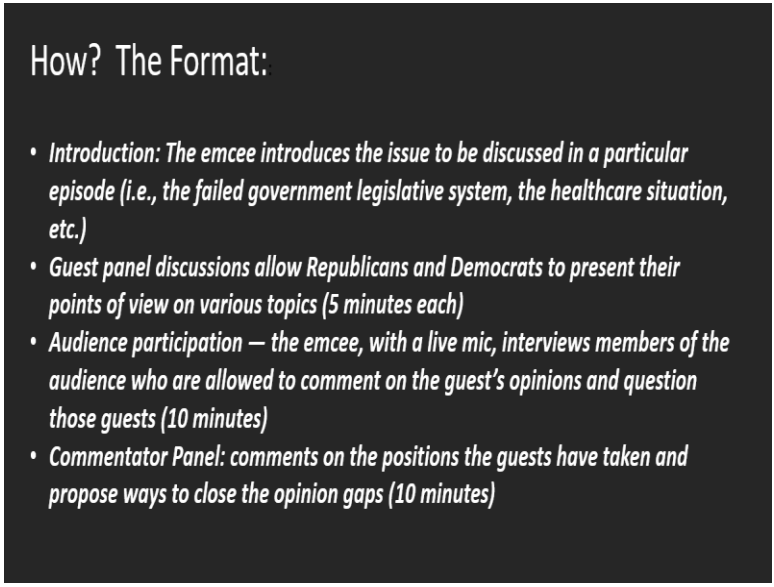
the guests and audience said and then look for some sort of common ground in order to move forward. And I wanted the title of my show to appear on this front cover: "middleground!" I was pretty pleased with the way it turned out, the whole project summarized on just one page...

Next, I had to state the goal of the show and create a log line, a one-sentence statement designed as a tagline to summarize what the show is all about succinctly. My key goal was to deal with the U.S. political rift. I planned to do that by explaining how U.S. governmental systems are broken; by showing how those systems can be fixed; encouraging dialogue through empathy; and focusing on topics that cross partisan boundaries that the American people really want, like universal healthcare, affordability, and economic equity.

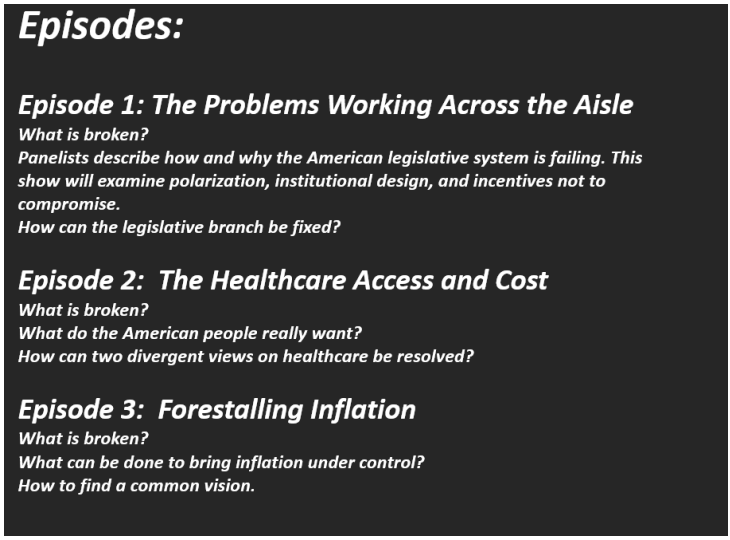
My goal slide, therefore, looked like this:


Our Goal:
To find ways, through panel discussion and audience participation, to mend the nation's political rift.
• How and why has our government broken down?
• What can we do to fix it?
• Empathy for the opinions of others (not necessarily agree, but appreciate)
• Concentrate on topics that are really important to the American people such as fixing the economy, affordability, healthcare, education...
Log Line:
"When Republicans and Democrats join forces to bridge a divided nation, unlikely allies discover the cost—and the power—of unity."

Describing the show structure was easy. I simply mimicked how the Phil Donahue show had been structured. So now I had to create a slide that explained the show format. I came up with this:


How? The Format:
• Introduction: The emcee introduces the issue to be discussed in a particular episode (i.e., the failed government legislative system, the healthcare situation, etc.)
• Guest panel discussions allow Republicans and Democrats to present their points of view on various topics (5 minutes each)
• Audience participation — the emcee, with a live mic, interviews members of the audience who are allowed to comment on the guest's opinions and question those guests (10 minutes)
• Commentator Panel: comments on the positions the guests have taken and propose ways to close the opinion gaps (10 minutes)

Next, I needed to articulate the topics to be covered during the show streams. I did these as episode suggestions.


Episodes:
Episode 1: The Problems Working Across the Aisle
What is broken?
Panelists describe how and why the American legislative system is failing. This show will examine polarization, institutional design, and incentives not to compromise.
How can the legislative branch be fixed?
Episode 2: The Healthcare Access and Cost
What is broken?
What do the American people really want?
How can two divergent views on healthcare be resolved?
Episode 3: Forestalling Inflation
What is broken?
What can be done to bring inflation under control?
How to find a common vision.

Episodes:
Episode 4: Jobs and Economic Growth
What is broken?
The AI opportunity/threat.
Job stability and economic opportunity.
What is the path forward?
Episode 5: Democracy and Election Integrity
What is broken?
Vote fraud.
Assuring voter representation.
Voter reeducation: What type of individual should be elected.
Episode 6: Housing and Affordability
What is broken?
A new, government-driven focus on housing?
Overcoming obstacles.
Aligning with the electorate.

Episodes:
Episode 7: Education and Workforce Development
What is broken?
Education for all? Why is this important?
How do other countries educate their populaces?
At what cost?
What is the path forward?
Episode 8: Crime and Public Safety
What is broken?
Is the immigration situation really about crime?
Is the government approach to virus and disease control prudent?
What should be done to rectify the situation?
Episode 9: Abortion and Reproductive Rights
What is broken?
Is this a government or religious issue?
Possible remedies discussion.
Should this be a state-only decision?

*

My Look Book was seven pages in length – just as I had targeted. *This was going to be a great show!*

*

Or was it?

Page by page, I looked over my Look Book. Something wasn't right. It just didn't resonate with me. The book left me feeling "hollow," like it wasn't going to hit the mark.

This is awful, I thought. *This sucks!*

Somehow, I needed to change it. Something, I was convinced, was wrong with the direction the show was heading. It was missing the mark...

I went through my Look Book one last time, and I just couldn't help but feel that my show was not going to accomplish what I wanted to achieve — what I needed it to perform. I needed to articulate the specific problems to be solved more clearly. I needed to articulate the fixes I want to see in order to change our government. And, after isolating those problems, I needed to realign my show to address the issues and solutions that I had identified...

Chapter 46: What's Really Going On

I've been a Poli-Sci teacher for over 30 years. I know exactly what is wrong with the U.S. government. Exactly!

So, what's buggin' me about my show?

I had been thinking a lot about how the federal government is currently operating. To fix the trajectory of my show, I determined, I had to start with *the premise that the U.S. federal government is broken*. There is a fundamental conflict between the conservative right and the liberal left about how our government should be run.

On the right, voters want a government that offers fewer social programs; fewer aid programs; no civil or equal rights protections; less fraud, waste, and abuse; a reduction in government bloat; and far less regulation. And the right wants strict voter registration enforcement — "voter integrity." And the right wants to get rid of those "job-stealing" migrants... And, let's not forget, as one MAGA voter told me: "We love our guns."

The left, on the other hand, wants a government that provides a social safety net for Americans. It wants the government to fund programs designed to prevent people from falling into severe poverty when they face hardship such as job loss, disability, low income, or unexpected crises. These programs provide cash, food, healthcare, or housing support to help people maintain a basic standard of living. The left favors programs that offer money or income support to the needy; food assistance; access to healthcare for everyone; and underwrite housing, making housing more accessible to all. And, of course, the left favors regulation such that the environment and worker rights are protected; it wants protections for minorities and women; wage equality; rural investment; and gun control.

So, imagine trying to form a functional government given such wide-ranging differences of opinion!

As a result of these disparate points of view, we now have a government that demands blind allegiance from our politicians to each party's ideological beliefs. This allegiance means that when one party controls the executive, legislative, and/or judicial branches, we all end up with laws and governance that support a right- or left-leaning agenda, depending on who is in power.

So, the biggest issue we face as a people is which type of government can serve these two *diametrically opposed governmental roles. How can we get our government to work again for the good of the people, rather than for the good of the party?* That, in a nutshell, is really the bottom-line challenge.

*

How did it get this way? I pondered. From my perspective, it began with Andrew Jackson's presidency and his populist movement, and with the overt patronage and corruption he was known for. In New York, in 1882, Senator William L. Marcy sought to defend Jackson's patronage appointments, stating: "*To the victor belongs the spoils.*" And that, in a nutshell, is where American politics are today. Currently, the Republicans, with majorities in the House and Senate, with the Presidency, and with ownership of the Supreme Court, are essentially saying to the left: "*To the victor belongs the spoils.*" When Democrats assume power, they too will take a "*To the victor belongs the spoils*" position. And when neither party is in firm control, nothing gets done for the American people...

No compromising. No bipartisanship. Broken...

Getting these two disparate groups to find a common ground was going to be a bear!

Chapter 47: The Death of Bipartisanship

In the old days, it was possible to run the government in a bipartisan fashion, to "adjust" it to serve the needs of the right and the left. It was called "bipartisanship."

One of my favorite examples of practical bipartisanship came during FDR's presidency, when Republicans and a significant voting bloc of Southern Democrats in Congress came together to rein in FDR's spending. With the actions of a "*Conservative Coalition*," rational, Congressionally-controlled spending was returned to the Legislative Branch. And this bipartisan balance was a good thing for the country. An American president had opened the floodgates of expenditures for pet projects, but his agenda went too far, too quickly. Congress reined him in...

*

In my lifetime, finding that bipartisan balance in today's House and Senate has proven elusive. And here's an example of how acerbic this bipartisanship has become. In January 2010, the Senate voted jointly to form an eighteen-member deficit-reduction *task force*. In other words, both parties agreed to work on finding ways to reduce our country's deficit.

In a bipartisan fashion, Democrat Kent Conrad of North Dakota and Republican Judd Greg of New Hampshire quickly brought a deficit resolution to the Senate floor. Initially, Republican leaders such as John McCain and Mitch McConnell supported the resolution. McCain even *cosponsored* the resolution!

On January 26th, the Senate blocked the committee's recommended bipartisan resolution. McConnell, McCain, and six other Republicans joined forces to kill it. I was astounded at the time. Why would the Republican leadership back the bill, even co-sponsor it, and then kill it?

Why did this happen? Because it became known that President Barack Obama, the country's first black president and a Democrat, supported the resolution, and the Republicans wouldn't allow any political credit to fall toward Obama! This was one of the most blatant examples of partisan politics I had seen in my lifetime. And there were more, and more, and more examples of this kind of partisan behavior to come...

This political brinksmanship, this loyalty to a party as opposed to doing what's right for the American people, is what's seriously wrong with American politics today.

*

Being from Maine for most of my life, and a Political Science educator, I, of course, regularly rubbed elbows with our federal and state politicians. And one of those people was Senator Olympia Snow, a Republican who served as a U.S. Senator for Maine from 1995 to 2013, and in the House of Representatives from 1979 to 1994. Over the years, I had watched Olympia work in a bipartisan fashion to help pass legislation, whether it had been introduced by Republicans or Democrats. But on February 28, 2012, Olympia announced that she would not seek re-election to the U.S. Senate. I was surprised by that announcement, curious about why it happened, and disappointed to lose her as our Maine Senator. And then came her explanation.

Olympia stated that she was stepping down due to the "*hyper-partisanship*" of a now dysfunctional Congress. And she indicated that she felt that she could no longer be productive in that environment for another term. And this was a harbinger of things to come as moderates gave way to extremists on both sides. It signaled the death of bipartisanship.

Her departure was a significant loss for Maine and for the United States Senate, and it signaled a big issue with bipartisanship to me.

*

After considering example after example of House and Senate partisan voting, I finally realized why my Look Book wasn't resonating with me. I wasn't suggesting a solution to the problem.

Chapter 48: My Fantasy Solutions

Frustrated, I continued my inner debate about how to steer my show toward fixing the polarization problem. And I began to fantasize about the changes I would make in both the Senate and the House to overcome partisan political practices.

I started writing and came up with eight things I'd fix to stop politicians from gaming the legislative system:

1. Find ways to end the exploitation of procedural rules (misusing tools like holds, filibusters, and strategic absences to block votes without having to take public positions).
2. Stop gerrymandering!
3. Prevent donors from leveraging campaign financing loopholes. Limit the amount of money one citizen can devote to a particular person or cause;
4. Reform committees. Committee seats are being assigned not for policy expertise, but as a means to drive donations.
5. Prevent unrelated provisions from being attached to 'must pass" bills and prevent the submission of thousand-page bills hours before a vote. Also, stop the practice of passing continuing resolutions to avoid tough budget decisions.
6. Punish legislators for crafting legislation favorable to industries they may later work for. Also, clamp down on using insider knowledge to gain an edge in stock trading.
7. At the Supreme Court level, eliminate the use of the "shadow docket" to sneak legislation past the public without discussion. And,
8. Eliminate the Electoral College, thus eliminating the impact of "swing states."

*

When I put my pen down and considered what I had just written, a realization struck me. *My show shouldn't be about dealing with contentious right/left issues such as healthcare, inflation, jobs, housing, affordability, reproductive rights, etcetera.* How many minds was I really likely to change by presenting both sides of the story to the American people and having commentators weigh in on what they had just heard? Deep down, I felt "not many."

But if I refocused the show on educating the American public about what politicians are doing to subvert the legislative system and what the Supreme Court is doing to weaken our Constitution, I felt I could genuinely make a difference. Fixing the system, I concluded, would get legislators to address the issues I had raised, which are essential to the American people. *Fixing the broken processes and procedures would eliminate obstacles and force legislators to work across the aisle on healthcare, inflation, jobs, election integrity, housing, affordability, education and workforce development, abortion and reproductive rights, and the environment.* This is what the American people really want: progress, not constant back-biting...

If I could structure my show to educate the American people about just how broken our legislative system is, I felt I could have a game-changing impact by helping to reduce our burdensome polarization.

It was time to draw up yet another Look Book...

Chapter 49: Here We Go Again...

Having rethought the show's purpose, it was time to create another Look Book, this time aimed at fixing government malfunctions.

I decided that the format really didn't need to change; it was serviceable. But the Log Line, goals and objectives, and episode topics all needed to change.

*

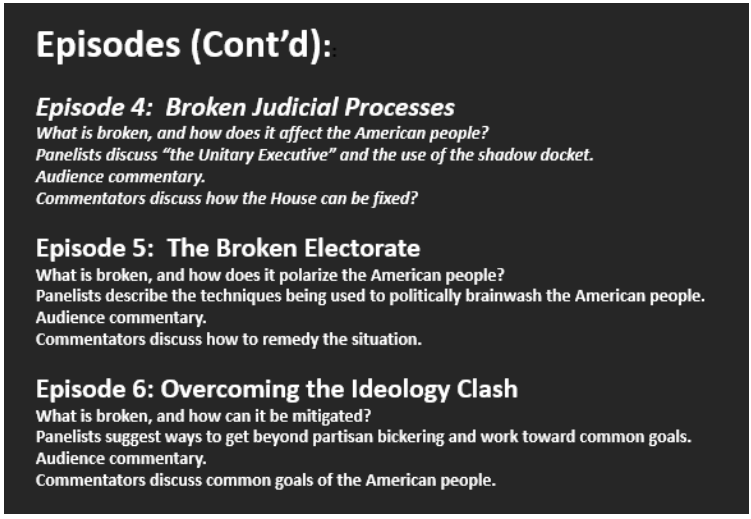
I kept my original cover page.

I changed the goals for the new show. Instead of reviewing key issues in legislation, I would now focus on the federal government's broken systems, including legislative, executive, and judicial misuses. Plus, I needed a new log line. This is what I chose for goals, objectives, and my log line:

Our Goals:
To show how government legislators on both sides of the aisle are misusing policies and procedures to subvert, prevent, or forestall important legislation
To show the effects of this systematic misuse of power affects the American people by preventing action on bills that all Americans want passed
To demand an end to this misuse such that our government can conduct its legislative business in a positive, bipartisan fashion
Log Line:
"When Republicans and Democrats finally act like partners instead of rivals, the entire nation reaps the rewards."

With the new focus on identifying broken government systems, the topic of every episode needed to change. Additionally, I added two new episodes, bringing the total to ten.

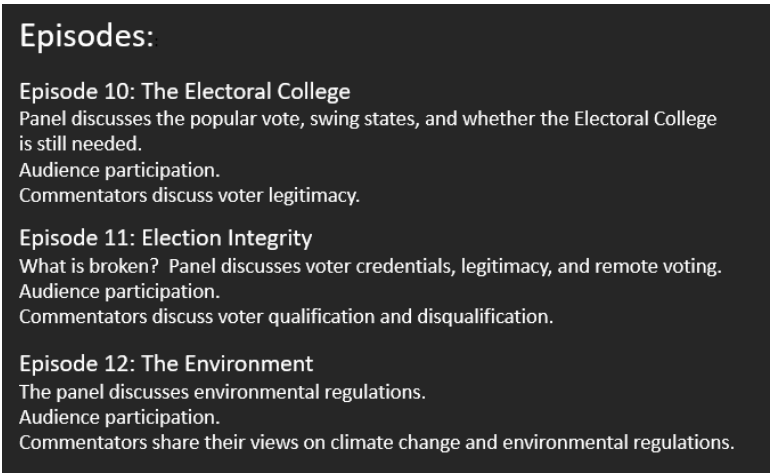
Episodes:
Episode 1: Broken Legislative Processes
What is broken, and how does it affect the American people?
Panelists describe how and why the American Senate is broken.
Audience commentary.
Commentators discuss how the Senate can be fixed?
Episode 2: Broken Legislative Processes II
What is broken, and how does it affect the American people?
Panelists describe how and why the American House of Representatives is broken.
Audience commentary.
Commentators discuss how the House can be fixed?
Episode 3: The Broken Executive Branch
What is broken, and how does it affect the American people?
Panelists describe Presidential misuse of Executive Powers and Constitutional violations.
Audience commentary.
Commentators discuss how the Senate can be fixed?


Episodes (Cont'd):
Episode 4: Broken Judicial Processes
What is broken, and how does it affect the American people?
Panelists discuss "the Unitary Executive" and the use of the shadow docket.
Audience commentary.
Commentators discuss how the House can be fixed?
Episode 5: The Broken Electorate
What is broken, and how does it polarize the American people?
Panelists describe the techniques being used to politically brainwash the American people.
Audience commentary.
Commentators discuss how to remedy the situation.
Episode 6: Overcoming the Ideology Clash
What is broken, and how can it be mitigated?
Panelists suggest ways to get beyond partisan bickering and work toward common goals.
Audience commentary.
Commentators discuss common goals of the American people.

Episodes (Cont'd):
Episode 7: What the American People Want
Panel discusses cross-party healthcare coverage options.
Audience commentary.
Commentator observations.
Episode 8: What the American People Want II
Panel discusses affordability and jobs.
Audience commentary.
Commentator observations.
Episode 9: What the American People Want III
Panel discusses education and workforce development.
Audience commentary.
Commentator observations.

And for the final three episodes, I continued with the "what's broken" theme with a show about the Electoral College, then turned my attention to election integrity and the environment. Those shows would serve as test cases for my next season, which

would be focused on the issues I articulated in my first Look Book.


Episodes:
Episode 10: The Electoral College
Panel discusses the popular vote, swing states, and whether the Electoral College is still needed.
Audience participation.
Commentators discuss voter legitimacy.
Episode 11: Election Integrity
What is broken? Panel discusses voter credentials, legitimacy, and remote voting.
Audience participation.
Commentators discuss voter qualification and disqualification.
Episode 12: The Environment
The panel discusses environmental regulations.
Audience participation.
Commentators share their views on climate change and environmental regulations.

In the end, I changed the focus of my show to cover the systemic abuse of our legislative, executive and judicial systems by politicians and judges. I figured that if the American people understood how acerbic our political system has become, we all may be willing to pressure Washington to change its governing practices...

*

Tito awakened around noon. And I had worked on my business case and Look Books since 5:00 a.m., so around seven hours. I had a workable plan and a workable Look Book. Next step: run it by Tito and Stephanie to get their feedback...

Chapter 50: Running It by Tito

Tito emerged famished from his slumber. So, I made him my world-famous imitation-Timmy Horton breakfast: a Maple Bacon Cheddar Croissant.

How was I to know that Tito was not a fan of maple flavoring?

Oh well, next time I'll just use original style bacon...

*

1:00 arrived, and we decided to make our way to the *Loyalist City Brewery*. I was in the mood for a porter, and they have a special hazelnut porter that is out of this world. Tito was hankering for a stout.

I planned to review my business case and Look Book with Tito over a few brews...

*

We grabbed a table near the front entrance where we could look out the window at passers-by as we sipped our suds. I took that opportunity to break out my new Look Book.

"So, on the ride up here, we talked about me doing another show," I started, as I handed a copy of my Look Book to Tito. "This is how I think I will organize it."

Tito looked at the cover and immediately understood what I was up to. "So, you're going to have a host leading a discussion with right and left panelists, and then have commentary by an audience, and a panel of commentators," he pauses, focused on the show name "*middleground!*"

"That's the idea," I said, as Tito turned to the next page. He glanced at the show goals and the logline, looking pensive.

"So, this is a bit different than your other shows," he observed. "You're moving away from focusing on the wrongs of the current administration, and moving toward common ground, or as you put it, middleground. So, more of a bipartisan approach. I like it!"

"And this log line is perfect. Nice and succinct," he continued. "*When Republicans and Democrats finally act like partners instead of rivals, the entire nation reaps the rewards.*"

Tito took a minute to study the show goals. "I'm looking for conflict," Tito explained. "Successful shows run on conflict and conflict resolution." He paused, taking in the three goal statements, then summarized.

"So, it looks to me like this is a teaching lesson with a call to action. Let's see where this goes..."

He quickly glanced at the show format but was more interested in the episode's content. He stopped on the page with the first three show outlines.

"Here it is," he announced as he perused the first three proposed episodes. "You're going to describe how the Senate is broken; then the House; and then the Executive Branch. Plenty of room for conflict in all of these shows," he concluded, and moved to the next page.

"Wow!" he said as he perused the following three shows. "So, you finish up with the broken branches with the Judicial System — and then you turn your attention to what the electorate, that's us, is doing wrong. Should be interesting."

He then looked at the ideology episode. "And so, in Episode 6, you finally get around to bridging the ideological divide." Tito considered that. "Professor, I think this comes too late in your show sequence. This should be the up-front message telling

people what you're trying to do, followed by what's stopping us from getting there."

Interesting, I thought. *He may have something there*. "Good feedback from my favorite student," I smiled. He had been an excellent student, and I do value his feedback.

Tito turned to shows 7-9. "Oooh. I like these. Now you're getting to real contentious issues: healthcare, jobs, education. Those will really spice up this series. I think you need to mention that you'll address these issues when you open your show. It's one thing to teach people what's wrong with our governmental systems — and it's necessary — but these topics are where the real conflict takes place. Tell them they need to understand what is broken in government before we undertake the fixes. Otherwise, I like where this show is headed."

Tito looked at the final "episodes" page. "*The Electoral College*; *Election Integrity*, and the *Environment*," he read aloud. He then thought for a moment. "I'm not sure how 'hot' these issues are to the American people at present. I'd be more inclined to use polling at the time you plan to do these shows to cover other topics that may be more important to viewers at that time."

He was right. "Good observation," I agreed. "Who knows what will be controversial at the time of future recordings. I agree, I think we'd be well served to play that by ear."

Chapter 51: Building the Base

It was now time to discuss Tito's role in my new productions. We both turned our attention to the show format.

"I've been doing this Poli-Sci gig for over 30 years, so I'm well connected and am sure that I can get all of the guests, both from the left and the right, that I will need to make for some pretty interesting discussions," I started.

Tito nodded. He did not doubt that I could attract all sorts of political guests. He knew this from my previous show, where I had been very successful in attracting the right people to be interviewed on the reality show.

"So, what I need from you is some advice on how to recapture my previous base and expand it. That is, if you're interested in participating with me in this endeavor."

"I definitely am," Tito affirmed, and shifted the conversation to how he could help increase the number of people following me.

"There are all sorts of things we can do to increase your followers," Tito started. The first thing we need to do is try to find a partner channel so that we can build off their base."

"Oh," I said, as I considered Tito's advice. I had not thought about partnering before. "You mean like trying to partner with *The MeidasTouch Network*? I asked. Meidas Touch is a YouTube channel that regularly produces progressive, pro-democracy news, commentary, and political analysis.

"Sort of," came Tito's reply. "But I would worry about partnering with them because they lean heavily to the left — and you're trying to appeal to both the left and the right. I think a more centrist partner would be a better choice."

"I'll give that some thought," I said. This is precisely why I want to produce this show with Tito's help. He's very good at marketing...

"The next thing we need to do is get the word out to your current followers. You need to do a quick video of your intentions, using your Look Book to draw them in. I can help record that if you wish."

"Next, you'll need to post consistently, on some sort of schedule, so that the audience knows when to expect your next video."

"I'm thinking that I can produce a video every two weeks," I replied.

"Good," Tito responded, as he continued with more ideas on how to build my viewership. "Next, we've got to study the analytics of your last show, the reality TV show you did with Mary. By looking at your retention graphs, identifying the audience drop-off points, and the CTRs, you will learn what your audience wants, so you can build your content to grab their attention.

"What's a '*CTR*?'" I asked.

"It means 'click-through rate.' It measures how many people clicked your video after seeing the thumbnail/title. A high CTR means your thumbnail and title are doing their job; a low CTR means that people are scrolling past your video. The object is to attract them with your thumbnails."

*

We continued our discussion for another fifteen minutes," at which point Tito declared, "Well, I think I've earned another beer!"

He definitely had. His assistance was proving to be invaluable.

We had another round of brews, then gathered our things and headed back to Stephanie's place. I picked up another pizza and some beer on the way home.

At the pizzeria, with Tito standing next to me, I specifically asked for maple-flavored pizza, but they didn't have any. I think Tito was relieved...

Chapter 52: Christmas Day

On Christmas Eve evening, I got Stephanie to tell Tito what she had planned for Christmas Day supper.

"We start with turkey," she told him. "I'm going to spatchcock it."

Tito looked confused. "Spatchcock?"

"Basically, you cut out the backbone, flatten the turkey, and cook it for a few hours. Spatchcocking takes about half as much time as cooking a whole turkey, and I think it cooks more evenly."

I added: "Stephanie spatchcocked a turkey for me a few months back, on Canadian Thanksgiving in mid-October. At that time, she taught me this method for cooking turkey. You know I love to cook," I said to Tito, "But I'd never done spatchcocking before."

I paused. "Hey Steph, can you show Tito how to remove the turkey spine and press it down?"

"Wanna learn?" Stephanie asked Tito.

"Absolutely," Tito said with enthusiasm. I thought getting Tito involved in the cooking process would be somewhat therapeutic.

"Excellent," I said, and continued. "And when the turkey is done, she captures the drippings and makes a stupendous gravy." I added, "And, she also makes a crazy recipe she calls 'gravy muffins.' She cooks stuffing, mixes in turkey bits, veggies, cheese, and a little gravy, then puts the mixture into muffin tins and bakes it to create a wonderful, tasty holiday meal or snack. I love 'em."

"I can show you how to make those, too, if you like," Stephanie offered to Tito.

"That sounds right up my alley. I would love to make those, too," Tito replied, then added, "And maybe we can make enough for breakfast tomorrow," he said hopefully as he looked at me...

I had told Stephanie about my maple Timmy Horton breakfast disaster, so she knew Tito was teasing about that. We all smiled knowingly.

"Well, we're not done yet," I continued. "Stephanie also makes homemade mashed potatoes the old-fashioned way — she mashes them, adds cream, and whips them, then smothers them in butter or gravy. These, too, are amazing!"

"Yum!" Tito exclaimed, again enthusiastically. "Maybe we can save some of those for breakfast, too," he joked, again looking at me.

"And if we run out of gravy, I've got maple syrup in the fridge!" I offered...

*

Overall, I think Tito was impressed by the menu that Stephanie was planning. It would be quite the feast. And to think he would have been at home in Orono alone for Christmas...

But instead, this remarkable woman was cooking him a feast. I think his spirits noticeably raised...

On Christmas Day, I was tasked with making dessert, and I planned to bake both a pumpkin pie and an apple pie.

There goes my waistline...

Chapter 53: The Three Orphans

The day we had all been waiting for, Christmas Day, finally arrived. And, in truth, I found it to be a little awkward.

*

Stephanie is an only child. Her father helped build the *Canadian Pacific Railway*, and when he died, he was survived by his wife, who passed a few years back, leaving Stephanie the family Victorian home in St. John and a small fortune. She works at the College because she loves her work. Otherwise, she's independently wealthy.

At Christmas, Stephanie puts together a little memorial for them, bringing out old family photos, placing them on a table, and surrounding them with holly, pine branches, pinecones, and random Christmas ornaments that hold sentimental meaning for her.

Her memorial to her parents carries a quiet sorrow. She misses them so deeply...

*

I, too, was an only child. And my parents have also passed. Mom died of cancer in 2008, and Dad died in 2019 — he was 79 when his heart gave out.

It's a weird thing when your parents pass. The world keeps moving, but something in you shifts forever. You become the keeper of all the stories, all the memories — the last witness to the lives that shaped you. Life goes on, but it never feels quite the same. You carry your parents with you in ways you didn't understand until they were gone.

I try to reflect on the good times we had on Christmas Day. But even that breaks my heart.

*

Neither Stephanie nor I could read Tito on Christmas Day. He didn't mention missing his father or being the only one left in his family. At times, he looked pensive, as if reflecting on what had happened earlier in the year to his father.

"He's holding it all in," Stephanie told me when Tito went back to his room to hop on the Internet. "He's gone up to shelter, to spend some alone time."

I agreed. "He's just kind of numb today. I'm sure he doesn't want to talk about his father. I'm sure it makes him angry — and sad. But I think it's good to have him here with us. It gives him people to talk to, a celebration to attend, and things to keep his mind off his memories. He'll cheer up when we sit down for supper, I'm sure of it."

Christmas Day in Canada is a big day for sports on TV. Stephanie and I are not that "into" sports, but Tito sure is. And he was having a blast channel surfing from sport to sport.

In St. John, we've got the NBA Christmas basketball games and the NFL football games — just like in America. But as Tito surfed, he also found skiing, snowboarding, figure skating specials, and Olympic-style highlight packages — all the stuff you'd expect to find on Canadian TV. That variety of shows kept him busy for much of the afternoon. And I watched some of the basketball games with him; I like basketball.

*

At supper, we got Tito talking about things he could do with my project. We also got him talking about his future higher education goals. He's a big fan of Maine hockey, so we got him to tell us all about that, too. And one thing I've noticed about Tito

over the years: He's never happier than when he's eating — and we had so much food!

*

As Christmas Day drew to a close, I considered Tito, Stephanie and my situation. I couldn't help thinking that we were all, in a way, "orphans." When both parents are dead, you're technically an orphan, though the term is rarely applied to adults. But I felt it applied to the three of us. On holidays, we all think: "The people who know me best, from the beginning, *are gone*." And, because none of us has any siblings or children, we think: "*We're the only ones left*." We feel lonely.

Stephanie and I have plenty of friends here in St. John, but those friends have families, and so they are spending time with their loved ones, doing Christmas shopping, and cooking Christmas dinners together. Meanwhile, we have no families... So, this Christmas it was to be just us — and Tito.

Christmas for me, and I'm sure for Stephanie and Tito, represents a time of remembrance of our past, a time to evaluate our current situations in life, and a time to consider what lies ahead. There is, for sure, sadness on this holiday, but we're all hopeful that joy lies ahead.

On a more positive note, we had a great day together, and we all agreed to make make Stephanie's place a continuing tradition every Christmas.

Chapter 54: The Show Flow

The day after Christmas, the sports fest continued for Tito. He again arose around noon and made a beeline for Stephanie's leftover gravy muffins. Just after noon, the IIHF World Junior Championship hockey games came on, and Tito loves hockey. I'm not a real fan; there are too many subjective offsides and icing calls. I especially don't like the offside calls; they slow down the game, and in a lot of instances, it appears to me that the infraction is selectively called. Stephanie isn't big on sports, but like every Canadian I know, she seems to love hockey, so she joined Tito to watch the game. I think the Canadian love of hockey is genetic.

Later, around 3:30, came the English Premier League coverage on Boxing Day Eve. That's what the Canadians call "football," and what we call "soccer." I skipped watching hockey with Tito but joined Tito later in the day for the soccer game.

*

On the 26th, I arose at my usual time — and, again, I knew that I would have until around noon to work on my show project. I started my day venturing down to the kitchen, where I had some of my delicious, perfectly cooked pumpkin pie for breakfast. I chased it down with a Diet Coke. It was wonderful.

I then went back to my desk and started working on the script for my first show. I just wanted to see how the flow felt.

To lay out my show flow, I use a screenwriting program called Final Draft. I filled it in loosely, not following all of the screenwriting dictates to the letter, but close enough. When I completed the fill-in, the show looked like this:

*

TITLE: EPISODE 1: GOVERNMENTAL DYSFUNCTION

FADE IN: Ominous music.

EXTERIOR. C-SPAN CLIP, SENATE FLOOR - EVENING
Use a real C-Span clip showing Senators refusing to collaborate with the other party on the Senate floor.

EMCEE (V.O.) Professorial Voice-Over.

What if I were to tell you that your politicians, by abusing Senate and House rules and by manipulating procedures, are the people directly responsible for the political divide in this country? *Would you believe me*?

INTERIOR: Show me on the empty Senate floor walking around explaining my points. Slowly zoom in on me.

EMCEE

Hello everyone — my name is Olivia Thomason, and this is the start of a new series: *middleground!* During these shows, I will

show you how the failure of our elected officials to work together in a bipartisan way is hurting this country and contributing heavily to our right-left polarization. I will show you how politicians manipulate our legislative, executive, and judicial branches, bending procedures and rules to impose their ideology on the opposing party. If we are ever to resolve our differences, our politicians must start working for the good of the country, not for the good of their own parties.

This show will not be a lecture series. Instead, I'll bring in politicians, educators, bloggers, and others to represent the right or the left. After these speakers have their say, I will open the floodgates for audience participation. We, the people, will have our say on what our speakers have described as their positions on various matters. And the show will conclude with analysis from multiple commentators, experts in political analysis, with their take on possible common ground — a middleground! — between the two opposing viewpoints.

To give credit where credit is due, America has done a show like this before, way back in the 1980s and 1990s — back when people could still talk reasonably with each other without acrimony.

I'd like to credit the Phil Donahue Show for providing the model for our show format.

*

But, because I didn't want to script the rest of my show, I used *Final Draft* a little differently than intended at this point. I used their categories, such as title, screen directions, props, speakers, etcetera, but I filled them in with general guidance, not scripted dialogue.

NOTE: THIS IS THEORETICALLY HOW THIS SHOW WILL GO...

*

INTERIOR: Show Speaker 1 sitting on a chair on the right of a stage. Show Speaker 2 seated on the left of the stage. Then cut back over to me.

EMCEE:

Today, in this episode, we will examine our *Broken Legislative Processes — and Why It Is Crucial to Fix Them.* Our broken political system is pulling us, the American people, in polarized directions.

*

NOTE: At this point, I had not contacted any speakers. But I had the perfect candidates in mind — two states approaching politics in two different ways. I'm aware that the State of Wyoming is pressuring moderate state representatives to toe the Republican party line, while neighboring Montana is trying to punish representatives who cross party lines to negotiate in good faith for the good of the people. Wyoming represents government malfunction at its finest. The State of Montana, conversely, represents effective government at its finest. Getting a

representative from each state would make for the perfect introductory show.

*

INTERIOR: Cut over to a close-up on the person representing the state of Wyoming.

EMCEE:

This is XYZ (the Wyoming state representative, yet to be named). He will be followed by several legislators from Montana.

Each state government is behaving very differently.

INTERIOR: Cut over to Professor Whitcomb. Zoom in as she starts to speak.

PROP: Start the time clock ticking at the bottom of the screen.

EMCEE

XYZ Wyoming representative, you have five minutes to tell us about Wyoming's legislative landscape. You will be followed by a Montana legislator who will describe the political landscape in their state. When each of you concludes your statements, I'll engage with the audience for ten minutes to gather observations, feedback, and comments. The show will conclude with an analysis of a group of commentators who will examine speakers' remarks and audience feedback, and offer suggestions for fixing broken political systems.

XYZ WYOMING REPRESENTATIVE

Unscripted. This will be an extemporaneous diatribe.

Get the XYZ Wyoming representative to explain in his own words how Wyoming's *Freedom Caucus*, which now controls the almost exclusively Republican legislature, has broken ties with certain moderate Republican senators. Seek to learn why this practice is taking place. (Get him to describe how the hard-right Wyoming Freedom Caucus, the conservative group that controls the legislature, is driving out moderate Republicans).

Mention that this was the first time anywhere in the U.S. that a *Freedom Caucus* faction has taken over a full state legislative chamber.

Get him to describe why traditional House GOP leaders — who had run Wyoming politics for decades — have been removed from leadership positions, have lost committee control, are now outnumbered in caucus meetings by far-right conservatives, and have wrought criticism from conservative Republicans for not sticking to the party line.

Describe how the Freedom caucus is pushing maximal ideological purity, anti-DEI; anti-environmental, social and governance (ESG) investments, and closely following the *Heritage Foundation 2025* agenda.

PROP: Clock shows time is up.

EMCEE:

Thank you, XYZ WYOMING REPRESENTATIVE, for sharing your perspectives on state government dysfunction in Wyoming.

And now, I'd like to introduce the MONTANA speaker.

INTERIOR: Cut over to a view of the speaker.

EMCEE

Senator, can you please tell the audience about the situation in Montana, where nine Republicans joined Democrats on rules votes and were censured by their fellow GOP representatives?

PROP: Show the clock beginning to run.

XYZ MONTANA SPEAKER

Unscripted.

Talk about the situation. Nine Republican state senators broke with their party and voted with Democrats on key rules and legislation.

Describe how, on the fourth evening of a Senate session, Senate President Matt Regier attempted to pass a new set of Senate rules. Nine Republicans joined all Democrats to block the suggested rules changes.

Describe why rule changes provide one party with specific legislative advantages over another, and how these rules and procedures impede important legislation, giving way to non-partisan ideological agendas.

Describe the pushback. Democrats pushed back against rules changes that would limit the new *Executive Review Committee* and redistribute minority-party members across committees, thereby overpowering minority dissent. Nine Republicans agreed with Democrats that the leadership's rules were too heavy-handed.

By splitting with the Republican majority, the nine dissenting Republican state senators were able to pass Medicaid benefits expansion, create a child tax credit, expand maternal healthcare,

pass a property tax cut, and block conservative bills on unions and judicial power. Point out that this is what your voters really want — concrete and beneficial legislative action as opposed to ideological supremacy.

Also, describe what county GOP committees did by issuing formal censure resolutions against members of the "Nine."

Describe how you followed your principles rather than the party line; how you supported the governor's agenda, and prioritized constituents over party loyalty.

PROP: Time clock runs out.

INTERIOR: Pan over to me. I'll be standing in the audience.

EMCEE:

Thank you all for sharing your perspectives on how effective governance can be if both parties work together.

Now, this is the segment where I turn our discussion over to the audience for comment.

Let me start with a question. "Between each form of government which would you prefer?"

Unscripted.

CONTINUE THIS DISCUSSION FOR 10 Minutes.

INTERIOR: Randomly choose audience members. Try to find members who have opposing points of view — and ask them why. Get them to ask the speaker questions. Focus on interaction.

PROP: The time clock runs out after ten minutes of audience participation.

EMCEE:

I'd like to thank everyone in the audience for participating in this critical discussion.

INTERIOR: Camera follows me as I walk over to the commentators' panel. Pan in on Commentators. Follow commentators as they respond. Pan in on each commentator as they speak.

As for Commentators, I'd like to introduce ABC, DEF, and GHI, from (name their respective organizations and discuss their credentials. (LET COMMENTATORS DISCUSS THE SHOW FROM A 'HOW TO FIX THE SITUATION' PERSPECTIVE.)

INTERIOR: Pan back to me.

EMCEE:

And I'm afraid that we have run out of time. I'd like to thank the panel members, the audience, and our commentators for their participation in this critical discussion. My summary: party behavior is responsible for our polarization — and this one-sided, partisan behavior has to stop. It is up to us, the electorate, to put moderate people in charge of our governments, people who can see both sides of an issue and work together to drive legislation that benefits the American people.

One parting comment. If you liked or even disliked today's show, please consider subscribing to my station. Please click the like or dislike button; it will show me whether we're on the right track for future shows.

END

*

I had risen at 5:00 a.m. and started working on my show outline at about 5:30. It was now 8:30, so it had taken me three hours to put together the rough outline of my first show.

I went back and reread what I had written. It was clear to me that, although the format would work, the logistics wouldn't:

- Renting studio space was going to be a problem.
- Paying for guest travel and lodging was going to be a problem.
- The videography would be costly.
- Contacting speakers and getting them enlisted to contribute was going to be time-consuming and difficult.

This show was going to be too expensive to produce! Now what was I going to do?

Chapter 55: Overcoming Obstacles

I was going to need some help figuring this out. And Tito was still asleep, so I started setting up the flow of my second show. But this time, I would change the logistics. To drive costs down, I would do the following:

- No studio. I would have to create a virtual studio, like a Zoom call, with speakers, audience interaction, and a discussion with the commentators, all managed by me.
- I would have to hire a technology manager to help manage the show's switching between speakers, audience members, and commentators.
- I would have to find ways to grow my viewership.

I decided that managing my show *virtually* would save me a significant amount of money. I was going to need some help, however, figuring out how to do this show technically.

*

My Look Book had already laid out the show schedule. Episode #2 would focus on dysfunction in the *federal government*, particularly in the House and Senate. My first show had focused on dysfunction at the state government level.

Episode #3 would be about the broken Executive Branch — and so on.

So, for the next few hours, I roughed together the remaining show topics...

Chapter 56: Landing Speakers and Commentators

The next question on my mind was where I would find my speakers and commentators. I pondered that. I needed unbiased participants willing to support the show's theme that our political system is broken, and it is leading to political polarization.

Finding speakers, I suspected, would be difficult. I would need government speakers and practitioners. I would need help here; perhaps members of the student body could help me by cold calling potential speakers. This was to-be-determined (TBD).

Another source for speakers, I speculated, might be *colleges and universities*. Several have reputations for political outspokenness and even have specific schools dedicated to political analysis. *Harvard's Kennedy School* was the first to come to mind, followed by *Stanford's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law*, and *Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies*. I'm sure there are other leading institutions to reach out to. And then I remembered to put the *University of Virginia's Miller Center* on my list. If I failed to find qualified politicians to speak on various topics, I was confident I could find academics to do so.

*

Finding commentators, I suspected, would be a bit easier. Having taught for over thirty years, I had a pretty good idea of where I could find commentators who would support my theme. The first source I would turn to for speakers and commentators is independent *Think Tanks*. These groups specialize in policy analysis. *Brookings Institute* immediately came to mind, followed by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), followed by the *Hoover Institution*, *Center for American Progress (CAP),* and the *Cato Institute.* Any of these would do...

And then I shuddered. The *Heritage Foundation*, the group responsible for the "*Mandate for Leadership*," the 2025 plan that the current administration is using as its playbook, is also a Think Tank. To represent the far-right, should I use them? In the end, I concluded that their plan calls for significant changes to government and social programs, so they would have to be included regardless of their political positions. I'd have to spend some time figuring out where I could use them, but I concluded it was essential to seek their perspectives, given the effect they are having on our government today.

I asked myself: *Is their plan to change our government from a social democracy to an authoritarian state in any way responsible for voter polarization*? I think the answer to that question is quite obvious...

I next thought about journalists and bloggers. *ProPublica, Politico, The Associated Press, Reuters NPR/PBS*, and *The Atlantic* are chock-full of reporters who cover politics. *Where would I find a group of reporters sympathetic to my polarization view to use as commentators?*

As I continued to consider organizations to put on my speaker/commentator list, several *legislative & government-tracking organizations* came to mind. This group basically decodes the mechanics of governance, so I was pretty sure I'd find sympathetic participants amongst them. I would put *Ballotpedia, OpenSecrets, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), GovTrack*, and the *Sunlight Foundation* on my list.

And then there are the *data-driven political analysts*. They would be invaluable for quantifying the damage caused by legislators who abuse legislative policy and procedures. These include the Pew Research Center, the Cook Political Report, FiveThirtyEight, Catalyst, and the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI*)*.

These folks are excellent for explaining voter behavior and long-term shifts. I put these organizations on my list.

Finally, I wonder if the watchdogs could serve as commentators. Groups like *CREW (Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington), the Campaign Legal Center, the Project on Government Oversight (POGO), the Center for Responsive Politics*, and *Common Cause*. All of these would be excellent candidates for supplying speakers and commentators.

*

As I looked over the list of speaker/commentator organizations, I felt that finding contacts within these organizations was going to be an enormous undertaking — a real time synch.

And then it occurred to me. We have a political club at our college comprised of poli-sci students. I would contact them after the holidays to see if they would sign up to track down contacts within all of the groups on my list.

It was now noon. Alex would be up soon. So, I would run this list by him to see if he had any additional insights on building my speaker/commentator contributor list, as well as any technical insights on my proposed virtual studio.

Chapter 57: The YouTube Short

After Tito finished his breakfast — or should I say brunch — and before he settled down to watch sports, I asked him what he thought about my virtual studio idea. He loved it and offered to reach out to some of his technical friends for advice on how to manage my show online.

And then came my student idea: using students to contact the organizations I had placed on my speakers/commentators list, reach out directly, and solicit their participation in my show.

"Sure, you can do that, but it's going to be a lot of work," he commented honestly. "I'd take that to AI and see if it can come up with a list for you."

It was good advice, but his follow-on advice was even better. "*How about we do a YouTube short introducing you and the new show you're about to introduce?* You'd be able to reach a lot more speakers/commentators that way if you ask them to contact you for speaking opportunities."

"Brilliant!" I smiled. "*Why didn't I think of that*?" I asked.

"Perhaps because you're old and still use a DVR to watch movies," he teased. And yes, I still do.

*

As Tito adjourned to watch the hockey game, I went back to my home office and roughed together a script for my YouTube short.

*

This is what I came up with:

> "Hello everyone," I started, "my name is Olivia Thomason, I'm a professor of Political Science at the College of New Brunswick in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada. Some of

you may recognize me from the reality TV show I used to host, "The POTUS," in which my co-host and I traveled to venues across the United States to discuss our concerns about various Executive Orders issued by the President of the United States. Those especially included his Executive Orders on *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion* (DEI) and his Immigration policies, because those had personally touched me."

"Today, I'd like to announce a new show, *'middleground!*, the purpose of which is to try open a dialogue between our polarized people and offer ways to fix the broken political system in the United States."

I paused, chuckled, and continued.

"I know, that's a *tall order*! And there's a lot to fix. But before we begin, allow me to tell you about the format of this new show."

I paused and created a *PowerPoint* slide that articulated my goal.

"My goal is to share with you the disconnects and shortcomings of our political system. To do so, I will invite people who represent the right and the left to state their cases on a particular issue, for instance, their views on how the current political system and political climate can be fixed. After we hear their points of view, I will turn to our streaming audience to gauge public opinion. Viewers will be chosen at random to express their points of view on the topic our guests have just discussed. If you're a listener, this could be you!"

I smiled, paused, then continued typing.

"When those opinions are heard, we will conclude each show with political analysis from a panel of three

> commentators. We will choose one who leans right, one who leans left, and one with no self-interest either way. They will discuss the opinions just expressed and suggest potential ways to fix them."

I then put together my closing request.

> "I'm going to need some help launching this show, particularly finding qualified speakers and commentators. If you agree with my assertion that our polarization problem stems from our political leadership and you have political analysis credentials, I'd love to hear from you. Please get in touch with me in the comments section below."

And that was that. I now had a new approach to producing my show online and a couple of new ways to find speakers and commentators.

"This is moving across quite nicely," I concluded. "Time to relax." And with that, I adjourned to watch the soccer game with Tito.

Chapter 58: The New Approach to Religion

From St. Mary's Rectory, I emailed my fellow priests after I met with the Bishop, informing them that he had given us the green light to examine a new Internet approach to religion, to run some focus groups with our parishioners to learn how they what information sources they are using to formulate opinions, and to start evaluating the use of media literacy as an education tool that might open doors for better Christian education and messaging.

*

At our next Council meeting in the first week of February, we discussed the Bishop's approval and how we would put our ideas into practice.

Regarding focus groups, two of my fellow priests offered to set them up in their parishes, and two others offered to email their parishioners to learn how our parishioners obtain secular information.

As for the Bishop's approval to better use the Internet for targeted outreach, I told my fellow committee members about the off-the-cuff discussion I had with the Bishop about Christian Nationalism. I told them that the Bishop takes a dim view of Christian Nationalism and encouraged me to find ways to combat it online.

I then shared an idea that had come to me when the Bishop and I closed our Christian Nationalism discussion. "The Bishop said something that I found particularly insightful. 'You, as Christians, have secular responsibilities. But it is important to separate domestic politics from the Kingdom of Heaven.'"

"That statement gave me an idea — and I like to run it by you," I offered. "Here goes: We have permission to find more creative ways to use the Internet for outreach, and the Bishop also wants us to find ways to educate our parishioners about media literacy."

I paused and asked, "So, what if we were to create our own 'show' that teaches our parishioners how to find truthful, non-biased information, and at the end of that show, we share with them how Jesus would have viewed certain issues. For instance, how Jesus would have viewed the immigration deportation situation in the U.S.; and how Jesus would have viewed the anti-DEI behavior that targets the LGBTQ+ community, as well as minorities. And how Jesus would have viewed the money hoarding power grab by the top 1% of earners in the U.S., and so on..."

I paused, waiting for a reaction. No one said anything; they were all mulling it over. Would a streaming show about various secular issues, guided by media literacy and concluded with Christian guidance, be well received by a local Catholic audience? And could we add a segment with local announcements, such as the Eucharist, socials, etc., to give it a more local flavor? And could we roll in anti-Christian Nationalist messages?

Would a show like that actually work as a new way to reach our congregations? Would a show like that compensate for the decline in Church attendance? Or, would a show like this compete with or even replace the Catholic Mass and other rituals?

It was a lot to consider.

*

The Paulist priest, Father Nathaniel Brodeur, was the first to speak. And he kinda took my side.

"What we have," he told our fellow Council members, "is a world moving toward secularism, and losing touch with Christian values." He let that sink in.

"Do you remember when we discussed Yuval Harari's books? Do you remember when Father Lucien said, 'We've got to find ways to augment secularism, to build our religion on top of it,' to marry

the two, such that if humans continue to become human-centric, we can augment that experience with a religious, moral overlay that reflects Catholic values?" He paused. "That's what the Bishop wants us to do — find ways to blend secularism with Catholicism, only, he wants us to find ways to do that electronically."

Then a Diocesan priest, Father Fimiani, pushed for clarification and for a test case. "So, let's start by defining 'secularism,' and then try to overlay our Catholic messaging on it."

"I'd suggest that we find one secular issue, and then take that approach," Father Cushing suggested.

"I think we need a common understanding of the differences between secularism and religion," Father Ashford, who teaches religion at a local preparatory school, chimed in. "Let me succinctly lay them out for you. Here's how I define secularism," he offered. "Secularism is not a belief system about God," he paused. "It's about how to govern people; how to keep the government neutral such that opposing views can be accommodated; and it's about keeping governments out of the religion business. It's a political and philosophical framework, not a religious framework."

Father Ashford let that point sit while the group mulled it over. I agreed with his assessment and offered a corresponding view of religion. "Religion, however, is about belief, worship, and moral guidance rooted in a *divinity*."

"So how do we marry the two?" asked Father Ellery. "They're completely opposite belief systems."

That was precisely where I was stuck. They are entirely different belief systems. Secularism takes a bottom-up approach, with authority deriving from human society; religion takes a top-down

approach, with authority deriving from God through our church leaders and divine scriptures.

Father Hale, another Diocesan priest, ventured an answer. "How about we start with what secularists want versus what religious people want? We religious folk differ from secularists on several issues. First and foremost is our view of authority."

Father Hale was voicing what I was thinking. *We're both on the same path.*

"We believe in divine revelation, sacred texts, and our spiritual leader, the Pope," Father Hale continued. "We take our guidance from those sources."

"Now secularists," he paused, "have a greatly different view of authority. Their sources of authority are human reason, science, and democratic processes. So, the question on the table is how do you blend these two differing world views?"

"And how do we package this blend such that it appeals to our religious communities?" I added.

There was, again, silence in the room as we all considered the conundrum.

Father Benedict Malloy, who rarely speaks but, when he does, his observations usually have a significant impact, suggested, "Religion shapes the moral imagination; secularism shapes the public framework." He paused. "Together, they allow a society to be both principled and pluralistic, allowing both views to coexist."

I immediately thought, *He's right. This is not about driving one group's beliefs over another. This is about blending our religious and moral principles with a secular view of authority.*

"How can that be done?" I asked.

"Oh, that can be done in many ways," Father Malloy offered. "One is to blend the moral insights derived from religion with public, secular life — suggest a moral overlay, but don't force it."

We all paused for thought. And, for some strange reason, Russia popped into my mind. So, my thought about Russia went from brain to mouth.

*

I broke into a diatribe. "I'm thinking about secularism and Russia," I thought out loud. "Russia allows certain religions, only state-approved religions. But they keep a tight grip on religious expression. Russia controls those religions with laws that are vague at best. Misbehave, or send an unapproved moral message, and your church can be labeled extremist or even a terrorist organization. The state constantly surveils religious communities to make sure they are towing the state line. Religious protesters can face long prison sentences for peaceful protests. There is also pressure to support the state, particularly the war in Ukraine. Clergy who express moral or religious opposition can be arrested and imprisoned." I paused, then summarized my point: "So, I guess what I am saying is their attempt to blend religion and secularism is really one-sided. The state allows religions but controls them."

Father Ashford spoke up. "This appears to be a case where the state is overlaying its secular belief on religion, which is the exact opposite effect than what we want to achieve. I think what we want is to acknowledge that the state has a role in governing society, while we have a role in influencing that society's morals." Father Ashford paused, then added: "So our message to our parishioners should be to follow Christ's teachings, and overlay Christian beliefs on your government. Make the government adopt programs that promote human dignity, promote justice, demonstrate compassion, and care for its people with integrity."

*

We ultimately identified several ways to reconcile Catholicism with secular government.

One was to acknowledge that secularism and Christianity differ but respect each other's boundaries. That means don't allow our government to become another Russia. The message to our parishioners should reflect this kind of thinking: we're in this together, not to control each other.

Next was "establish a common ground." We agreed that the government and the church should share *common ethical grounds*. Our government should be compassionate and just; it must respect human dignity, care for the vulnerable, practice honesty and transparency, and promote peace.

We decided that our approach to the current regime should be to identify the disconnects between government policy and Christianity and to *demand* ethical behavior.

We also discussed "procedural secularism" versus "cultural religion." This is where we want our government to remain neutral when it comes to religion, allowing our culture to be free to choose secularism, religion, or both. This allows religious people to live fully religious lives and secular people to live fully secular lives, without one dominating the other.

We touched on the Christian Nationalism issue and decided that we need to educate real Christians to resist the current regime's insistence that America become a "*Christian Country*," because failure to do so would make America a Russian-like society. Religion answers the question: "*Why are we here*?" and answers it with a higher morality ruling over human instincts. Secularism answers the question: "*How do we live together*?" and answers it with a human construct of government. Each narrative should be kept distinct because, in that manner, secularism and religion stop

competing with each other. But humans must look beyond their own ideologies that are often governed by government, and thus complement each other.

*

As for how we could launch our new messaging, the approach we ultimately agreed upon involved using the Internet to reach our faithful with bona fide, media-integrity-sanitized, reliable news statements, followed by statements on what the Catholic Church believes Jesus would do to address the same issues.

The bottom line: News, scoured using media literacy techniques, overlaid with simple religious guidance.

Chapter 59: Informing the Bishop

I was again selected to meet with the Bishop to discuss our Council's deliberations and final recommendations.

*

When I met with the Bishop, I put forward our key finding simply: "We need to say, 'it's okay to be secular,' or 'it's okay to be a humanist,' but religious beliefs should have a role in how you make moral and ethical decisions."

"So, how do we find ways to message our parishioners about politics — the secular world — while not taking a political stance ourselves?" the Bishop asked. "And how do we reinforce values such as love, humility, mercy, reconciliation over retaliation, truthfulness, generosity and the like when it comes to political discussions?"

I laid it on the Bishop: "I suggested that we consider doing a streaming show. It would review today's issues and sanitize them using media literacy techniques. We describe what we believe is the truth on any given issue. And then we tell our viewers what Jesus would have had to say about these issues — what he would have taught. And, for our local congregations, we conclude with local church news."

"Does this tie into the bot discussion that we had the last time — the idea of using bots to deliver news more directly with our congregations?" the Bishop asked.

"It does," I replied. "We would use bots to push the idea of our show to our parishioners. And we would use them to make our parishioners aware of what is going on at our local churches."

"Delightful," the Bishop responded, "and did you..."

I knew what his next question would be, and replied before he finished his sentence. "And, yes, I did get a quote for ' bot creation' and social media push. The fees are quite reasonable."

I reached into my briefcase and produced a quote for the Bishop's review. "I'll look these over and give you my response later," the Bishop replied as he accepted my report. "But, as for now, I'm very intrigued by your proposed show. Tell me more."

*

At that moment, a brisk, urgent knock sounded at the door. The Bishop instructed his visitor, his secretary, to enter.

"Bishop Donnelly," she announced, tersely, but emphatically, "I think you need to see this!"

In her hand, she held a printout of a story just released over the newswires. Our cardinal, Cardinal Joseph Tobin, had just been interviewed and came down sharply on the U.S. government's ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement organization. This organization had just recently killed two U.S. citizens — both of whom were protesting the despicable and inhumane seizure tactics of ICE. And that, finally, triggered a Catholic Church response. Cardinal Tobin is one of the top Catholic leaders in the U.S. — and he is closely aligned with Pope Leo. In his interview, he declared ICE a "*lawless organization*" and urged members of the Church to pressure lawmakers to block funding for ICE. The Bishop looked closely at me. The last time we spoke, he mentioned that two issues were weighing heavily on his mind: Christian Nationalism and U.S. Immigration policy.

"Well," he said, "we are now officially on record opposing ICE. Now there's a secular/religious clash for you!"

"This is the type of conflict that would be ideally suited for a show about secularism overlayed with Jesus' teachings," I said.

Chapter 60: My Reaction

The Bishop thanked his secretary for her attention to detail; she looked pleased as she returned to her office.

He turned his attention to me. "So, Father Lucien," he started, with a sincere look on his face, "how would your new show handle this situation?"

I thought for a moment. *Organized protests? Confrontations? Bring more of what was happening in Minnesota to Massachusetts?* I zeroed in on: *What is the Christian thing to do in this situation?*

"Bishop," I responded, "I think the messaging to our congregations should be that the current administration and its minions need to be forgiven for their Godless activities, their attack on immigrants, their acts of war, their misogyny, their attacks on DEI, and so much more. We've got to acknowledge that what they're doing is wrong, but as Catholics, we've got to undertake corrective actions that underscore our Christian beliefs."

I thought carefully about the following observation I was about to make. "Your Excellency, as a Catholic, I would encourage non-violent protest against immigration policy as an expression of faith. Rallies, marches, sit-ins and other forms of Freedom of Expression that strongly emphasize Christian values without violence. We don't get in their faces, saying '*what you're doing is against secular law as well as Church law*,' and directly challenge their secular authority. Instead, we say, through our peaceful protests, that the actions of the federal government fly in the face of our Christian beliefs."

Was I being too radical? I asked myself. I awaited the Bishop's reply.

The Bishop contemplated what I had just said. He turned his attention to the Pope's guidance on this matter — an American Pope, for that matter, one who understands exactly what is going on in America.

Pope Leo XIV has largely followed Pope Francis' guidance on American politics. On borders and nationalism, the Pope advises, "*Where there is love, there is no room for prejudice, for 'security' zones separating us from our neighbors, for the exclusionary mindset that, tragically, we now see emerging also in political nationalisms.*" He also talks about human dignity; and about the need to resist global conflict. God's plan, he contends, contrasts with "armed strategies and hypocritical rhetoric."

"Does the Pope actually want us to protest secular abuse?" the Bishop posited.

I thought back to the situation in San Diego earlier this year. The Pope had just appointed Bishop Michael Pham to lead the Catholic Diocese of San Diego. The Bishop chose to commemorate World Refugee Day by protesting U.S. immigration enforcement that targeted immigrants attempting to follow the law by attending asylum hearings. That Bishop and members of his clergy stood arm-in-arm with the targeted immigrants, putting ICE in the position of arresting members of the Church. ICE backed down. The Bishop's actions align with Pope Leo's openness, respect for human dignity, and commitment to migrants' initiatives. And in Catholic governance, local bishops can act autonomously unless Rome explicitly directs otherwise.

"Like Bishop Pham in San Diego, I would encourage such messaging to our people," I answered.

"Fine, then," the Bishop replied. "Regroup with the Council, discuss these ideas, and get back to me with a plan on how to

deliver the messages that we have just discussed using the new, media-savvy, locally targeted outreach that you've articulated — your new show."

I nodded and affirmed his request. "I will do that, Your Excellency."

*

It is difficult to describe how I felt after that meeting. Trepidation? Excitement? Relevance? Relieved that the Catholic Church was finally becoming active in the ICE debate?

One feeling was certain: I was tremendously pleased that I had been placed in a position to promote the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Part III: The New Shows

Chapter 61: How to Orchestrate This?

Stephanie was away again for most of the day, allowing me to work on my new show idea uninterrupted. I spent considerable time trying to remember why the Phil Donahue show was so successful. I concluded that the magic of the Phil Donahue Show was its roaming microphone, which Phil used to link the audience with the presenters, thus creating unpredictable and sometimes tense back-and-forth discussions between "regular people" and the guest speakers.

Now, how would I produce my new show? In essence, I determined that I had to solve three problems:

1. How the camera would follow me during the show;
2. How I was going to manage interactions between viewers and speakers; and,
3. How I was going to handle commentator comments and interaction at the end of the show.

With the delivery mechanism — the Internet — decided, I turned my attention to movement and orchestration. I just intuitively knew I needed some sort of physical action, some visual flow, some activity. I couldn't have people just sitting around speaking and offering opinions that would be dull for viewers. If I were unable to figure out how to incorporate movement into my show, my speakers would be static, just lecturing — and that would be boring. And my commentators would just be expressing opinion — again, while sitting in chairs without motion — static. And I was at a loss to figure out how I could make the audience interaction interactive rather than passive.

As I considered show flow, orchestration, and movement, I determined that having an emcee who moves around and is active would be key. The emcee would serve as the guide and focal point of the show. I thus determined that the emcee would be

responsible for launching action sequences — such as introducing guests and interacting with them before they made their presentations, or launching and guiding the audience segment, or managing the commentator segment.

*

I started my new show flow by revising the first show outline I had created the day after Christmas. I began by heeding Tito's comment on my show outline: "*Be sure to focus on controversy.*"

I reviewed my first outline to ensure it would generate conflict. I would have my guests discuss several issues related to government dysfunction. I would have my guests point out how our legislative, executive, and judicial systems are failing us — and I determined that there is plenty of controversy to be found in the behavior of each branch.

Satisfied with the show topics, I reimagined the flow for an Online show rather than a studio show with live speakers and a live audience. I envisioned the emcee, me, moving around guiding the show, digitally introducing speakers, conversing with audience members and summarizing the commentators' statements.

As I thought about interacting with the audience, I found myself at a technological disadvantage. I had only a rough idea about how to handle digital interaction. I knew there were several ways to conduct large meetings online, including YouTube Live, Twitch, Facebook Live, and other platforms such as *Zoom*. But I didn't really know how to manage audience commentary and questions. This technical aspect was beyond my expertise. I would need technological help. I'd run this by Tito to see what he suggested. And I'd run it by my College videography team in Fredericton.

Regarding the interaction with the commentators, I found it straightforward. I'd have someone record me speaking with them as well as their responses. So, a zoom-in on me asking questions

and clarifying answers, along with zoom-ins on the commentators as they provided their feedback.

At this point, I was stuck. I had to figure out how to do all of this electronically.

I spoke with Tito about my orchestration challenges, and he said, "Professor, I don't know how to manage that stuff either. I'm good at the marketing side of your show, driving up subscribers and finding new outlets, but as for how to visually manage your show, I don't know how to do that stuff."

So, that left me stranded. I needed a technical consultant to advise me on how to enhance the show's interactivity.

Chapter 62: My New Technical Advisor

Back in St. John, I prepared for the beginning of the following semester. When classes resumed after the Christmas break, I called the *College of New Brunswick Media Lab* in Fredericton, spoke with its administrator, and explained my objective. This lab is where students go to work hands-on with cameras and software to create and edit videos.

That administrator steered me to a star student who had recently graduated and created her own video studio. And, it turned out that that student, Rhea Calderone, was a local — she had settled in St. John after graduation! I contacted Ms. Calderone and had a brief discussion about how to organize my new show. And despite being so young, she seemed to know all of the tricks of the trade.

*

I invited Rhea to come visit me at my on-campus office at the College.

When Rhea arrived, my first reaction was "she's awfully young." I wondered if she would be up to the task I was about to lay before her.

Physically, I would describe Rhea as "shapely." Her body frame is what people used to call "Rubenesque," meaning "full-figured." She is about 5 feet tall, and I suspect she weighs approximately 125 pounds. She's definitely of Latin heritage, with her dark, long hair, brown eyes, brown skin, her broad nose and full lips. I assumed she was about 22 because she had recently graduated from the College. As for her demeanor, I found her very businesslike, which was notable given her young age. Oh, and I forgot, she's full-breasted — very buxom...

*

Initially, we discussed the courses she had taken at the College, then moved on to how she is applying that education. She described her new videography business and said she had already secured several clients across the province. Her start-up business was going well.

She captured my attention. But how good was she really from a technical perspective?

To bring her up to speed quickly, I presented her with my Look Book and then described what I was trying to do. She immediately grasped the intent of my show — and, in short order, we started brainstorming.

"So, where I'm stuck," I admitted, "is on how to make my show active. It will be given over the Internet, and I don't want speakers and commentators just sitting around expressing opinions — I need to have them be active in some way."

Rhea smiled. She must have been thinking, "*Old people have no understanding of videography.*" And in this case, she was probably right.

Then her ideas began to flow.

"Well, let's see," Rhea started. "So, you're going to want the ability to support thousands of users, and you want to give them the opportunity to interact with your show. You'll want to record it and post it so other viewers can watch it at their leisure. So, the question is how to handle a large audience and make it interactive."

I agreed. I told her I was familiar with *YouTube Live, Twitch, Facebook Liv*e, and a few other platforms, but I had no idea how to use them effectively.

"Well, it seems to me that you need to create a camera environment and choreography that mimics this Phil Donahue Show that you have described. To do that with a live audience, you'll need a roaming Steadicam to follow you, the host. You're also going to need a videographer to do a bunch of audience pans, a series of wide audience shots showing general audience reactions to what is being said. And because your audience is digital, you'll need to find a creative way to engage them. You're going to need zooms of your guests. And, to create your virtual audience, I think you're going to need a *digital wall*."

I got Rhea to pause for a moment. "Can you explain to me what a digital wall is?"

"Of course," she answered. "Technically, it's a group of display screens that are tiled together by a controller that syncs them into one big display. So, you could have an entire wall of audience shots — and you can interact with that as your virtual audience. The controller software lets you display your content in a whole bunch of ways, including full wall video, split screens, live feeds, data, and so on."

I thought about what she had just told me and asked: "Does this mean that I can use this digital wall to 'move around' and interact with audience comments, display charts, or provide live feeds in real time?"

"Exactly," Rhea replied and smiled. I think that smile was sort of a "*hey, not bad for an old person...*"

She continued. "I think what you want to do is display a bunch of audience participants on a digital wall, but add a bunch of live activities, making you active while giving the entire audience the ability to participate in your show. You could also run live polling during the show. You could ask questions like 'Do you agree with this guest on this issue?' and that sort of thing. And also, there's

software that allows you to measure audience reactions — there are *audience reaction meters*."

Rhea paused, still thinking of other options. I was liking what I was hearing, so far. I was pleased that she had thought up new ways to liven up the show electronically. And I kept thinking: "*Wow, this little spark plug is really sharp*."

Rhea wasn't quite done with her suggestions; she added a few additional ideas. "You could also create a live question queue, creating an area on the screen where the audience can queue up to ask your speakers questions. And you could have an on-screen comments section that would continue to stream comments while the show is going on." She paused to think that one through. "You'd have to curate those comments, though, in case some nutcase starts to rant..."

She paused to see if she had any further audience-participation ideas. She didn't at that time.

She continued to ponder how to get an emcee actively moving online. "I think you're going to have to talk to a producer about that one."

"Good idea," I suggested. "I'll look into that."

*

Rhea had impressed me, and now it was time for the big question. "So, given the task at hand, would you be willing to help me build and deliver this show?"

She smiled; she was pleased with my request. "I would love to — it would be exciting, it will help me grow my business, and I will get a lot of notoriety out of it. So, yes! Definitely yes!"

Rhea and I worked out a financial arrangement: a graduated scale that paid her a little cash up front to get started, with her earnings

rising with the show's success. She was hungry, and I was cheap, so the graduating scale worked well for both of us.

*

I thought Rhea's advice to speak with a video producer was astute, so after our discussion, I contacted a producer at Alex's company, PCPTV. I had worked with him before on my reality show, so he knew me and was interested in helping me out. He suggested two things:

1. Treat the digital board like a second stage. You stand on your stage, a videographer recording your every move, and you walk toward the audience member on the digital board. The videographer needs to make it appear as if you are directly interacting with that person.

I really liked that idea. I'd need to speak with Rhea to determine how that could be accomplished. Could she be the video operator?

His second idea was to use a "digital pointer" to select members of the audience. That gives the illusion of motion.

2. "So, you point at the audience member, their mic opens, and the system zooms in on that person, and then you walk toward that person, asking questions, becoming involved in dialogue, and steering their questions to the appropriate guest."

I liked that idea, too.

When we ended that call, I was smiling. *I can do this — I can definitely do this. And it's going to be great!*

Chapter 63: The 1st Speakers and Commentators

With a contract in hand, Rhea set to work. She helped me choose my delivery platform. We chose *YouTube*. Then she helped me build my digital board, which I paid for out of pocket, just as I had for a video pointer. Rhea already had the professional-quality video equipment she needed to record my audience interaction. And she had video-editing software, so recording and editing my videos would not entail significant capital or labor costs. And, finally, she found office space that we could use as our show venue.

With the technology issues resolved, it was time to line up the guests, select the commentators, and announce the first show date and time to the world. I turned that task over to Tito.

Per Tito's advice, I shifted the content of the first show. Tito felt I had to lay the groundwork for the show and suggested I provide examples of how a democratic government works and doesn't work to show that the show is not a one-sided ideological show, but rather a balanced, common-solutions show.

In response to Tito's feedback, I used "middleground!" as my series name. I called this first episode: "*The Groundwork*." With the groundwork laid, I could then proceed with my original show plans, which would examine how the U.S. Senate, the House, the Executive Branch, and the Judicial Branch are broken.

*

First things first — who would I get to speak in the first "*The Groundwork*" episode?

I went back to the original script I wrote after Christmas for my first show. I began by contacting Republican leaders in the Wyoming State Legislature and Senate. I called ten legislators and two senators. When I explained what I was trying to do and

the show's purpose, none of these legislators agreed to participate. I think they quickly spread the news amongst themselves that I was trying to create a show focused on finding a middleground between Democrats and Republicans. They wanted nothing to do with such a show. Too bad. They would have made the perfect contrast to what's going on in Montana.

I went online and looked up who was teaching PoliSci at the University of Wyoming. And, lo and behold, I found Professor Clara Whitcomb. I had read her book on "Populism." I managed to reach her; we chatted for a while about her book and the courses she was involved in at the University. I explained my situation, and I asked for her assistance.

"I need you to represent the Wyoming side of the story, showing overt, raw partisanship in the state senate," I explained.

"I can do that. In fact, I'd love to do that. I can tell your audience about the situation in the legislature and in the senate, and provide my insights on how they are broken," she offered. "And I can tell them what needs to be done to fix the current situation."

I mulled over her offer to suggest remedies. After a few seconds, I responded, "That all would work, with the exception of describing the remedies to the situation. I need you to come off unbiased — 'just-the-facts, ma'am,'" I stated. "The commentators at the end of the show will have the responsibility of suggesting remedies."

"Just-the-facts it is," she agreed. "I'll explain what the state legislators and senators are doing. I'll point to the legislation that they are promoting. I'll then link to surveys showing what Wyomingites want. That should do the trick," she offered.

"That sounds perfect," I responded. "Just perfect..."

Professor Whitcomb, whom I now call Clara, sent me a PowerPoint presentation for her forthcoming speaking engagement to make sure she was on target. She was, I affirmed.

"That will be just perfect," I told her. "Can't wait!"

*

Now that I had enlisted Clara to tell the Wyoming side of the story, I turned my attention to members of the Montana legislature. Miraculously, I got three Montana representatives to step forward! Representatives Thaddeus Crow, Mara Vexley, and Julian Strake stepped forward to represent the Montana situation, in which several Republicans defected from their party and worked with Democrats to pass legislation their constituents wanted.

I now had my speakers lined up.

*

Finally, I had to find knowledgeable commentators. The *YouTube Short* Tito helped me put together several candidates who could serve as commentators. I chose one from the *Brookings Institution and one from the Associated Press, and I took a huge risk* by inviting commentary from a think tank that calls itself "*The Heritage Analysis Group*." That choice was both a blessing and a curse...

Chapter 64: The Big Day

The big day arrived: *Friday, January 16, 2026*, and Rhea and I were ready. She operated the controls and handled the videography; she managed the audience interaction segment on the digital wall; and I emceed and produced the show.

From a technical perspective, the show went smoothly. Amazingly, no technical glitches! It started with the script I wrote the day after Christmas. That script described what the show was about; who I am; and its format, with speakers, an audience contingent, and commentators.

Once I got the show groundwork out of the way, I moved quickly to the speaker segment.

*

Clara told her story about how the Wyoming legislative system is broken. Wyoming politicians are towing the party line, more specifically, *towing the partisan party line*, pressuring moderates to get out of the way, and pushing their Project 2025 agenda. She did so in an unbiased fashion, simply describing the political pressure they are placing on moderates and Democrats at the expense of advancing the peoples' agenda.

The three speakers from Montana told their story of how members of their own party have labeled them "*The Nasty Nine*" because they, along with six other Republican State Senators, had the temerity to vote in a bipartisan fashion to pass important legislation.

I, as emcee, summarized their presentations by saying: "This is what our show seeks to reveal. Political behaviors that drive polarization — and, every once in a while, to portray heroes who are acting in the public's good, as opposed to exercising partisan

politics." I paused, "But now let's hear what the audience has to say..."

*

And this is where things got ugly...

It was time for the technically tricky part: audience participation. As we began this segment, Rhea aimed her video camera at me, showing me standing before the digital wall, with about 30 video clips of viewers on the screen. I used my pointer to randomly choose audience members to ask them questions. I listened to their comments, accepted their questions, and then redirected and funneled them back to the appropriate speakers.

The first audience member whom I randomly chose was wearing a "Cowboys" Stetson; it was labeled "Cowboys," and I interpreted that to mean that he was a fan of the *University of Wyoming* "*Cowboys*" football team. I determined that because he had a bucking-bronco logo on his hat. I knew that wasn't the Dallas *Cowboys* logo; they use a star.

"Sir," I said to the Cowboy, "Do you have a question or comment for the speakers?"

Rhea switched the screen to him, zoomed in, and he quickly began his diatribe. "Back where I come from, everybody votes Republican — and for good reason. We want America back to the way it used to be, when a man could make a good living, where we had the backbone to support ourselves without government aid, and where we didn't have millions of lazy people sponging off of our hard-earned taxpayer dollars. We want that America back!"

*

I learned after the episode that the chat boards lit up after the Cowboy's statement. A chat board is an online space where

people post messages and exchange them in a shared discussion. Tito had implemented chat boards in my reality show, and they worked brilliantly as a means to encourage discussion. Hundreds of people immediately commented on the Cowboy's assertions.

*

I directed the Cowboy's statement to Professor Whitcomb, who had spoken about how the Wyoming Republicans were treating moderates within their own party.

Clara didn't back down from her original assertion. "I'm sorry," she replied, ready for a tussle. "Did you say that the people of Wyoming don't accept government aid — and have always managed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps? You must know that the state accepts farm aid, health care, direct benefits to individuals, and salaries for federal employees. And you know, of course, that Wyoming has implemented programs such as the *Hunger Relief Program* to assist with food needs, and federal grants are distributed across sectors, including business, education, housing, veterans, and personal grants. Wyoming takes over three billion dollars a year from the federal government, and a lot of that money goes to food assistance and welfare programs."

"Those are the people we have no stomach for," the Cowboy said. "The hangers-on, the people exploiting the system for welfare. This is why we want our state house and senate to adhere to strict Republicanism — no free lunch for those unwilling to work for it."

I sensed that I had randomly chosen a real red-neck as my first speaker — and I panicked a little. This was not moving toward finding common ground; it was a partisan continuation that exacerbated polarization.

Or was it? Does this airing of grievances facilitate bipartisan communication? One group airs its grievances, leading the other

group to understand its point of view. Maybe this is going in a positive direction...

I directed the following question to the audience. "*Does everyone agree with this audience member's position that the government should not provide hand-outs to the unworthy*?"

I next chose an older woman, perhaps sixty, who clearly had something to say. "I absolutely agree with him. We, the people, speak through our votes, and Wyoming voted Republican by a large margin. That means we want our legislators and state senators to vote for Republican ideals."

I considered her comment. *Yet another Republican Absolutist*, I thought. *How did I get so lucky*?

"Thank you for your comment," I replied, as Rhea zeroed back in on me. I briefly wondered what she considered the Republican Party's ideals to be, but decided not to press the issue in order to keep the action going.

I redirected her comment back to Professor Whitcomb.

"Professor, how do you feel about the comments made by the last audience member?"

"Well," Professor Whitcomb paused, "She's definitely entitled to her opinion."

I breathed a sigh of relief. The professor was being conciliatory, not confrontational.

Professor Whitcomb continued. "But I think she also needs to consider the needs, wants, and desires of those who did not vote Republican. A democracy flourishes when all voices are heard, not just one voice."

Professor Whitcomb's reply was succinct, which is precisely what I want in this audience/speaker interaction phase of the show. I

want a lot of back-and-forth, and quick hitting is preferable. I was also pleased that she didn't say, "Authoritarian governments, however, thrive when only one voice is heard." That would have been polarizing.

I readdressed the digital wall and asked the audience, "Does anyone else have any questions or comments for our speakers?"

I chose a younger woman, perhaps a college student, to provide her comments or ask her a question.

"I just want to say that I applaud the actions of the Montana delegation. In one of my college classes, we examined this situation. The Montana representatives passed legislation that reauthorized Medicaid expansion, expanded maternal health care, provided young families with a new tax credit, authorized property tax relief for homeowners, and more. These are the things that voters want — not party bickering, and we don't want the MAGA ideology jammed down our throats..."

Once the word MAGA came up, I knew we were headed back down the polarization rat hole, so I quickly ended that discussion by thanking her for her comments and moving on.

I took one more question from the audience, this time from a black man, perhaps 30 years old. And he asked a passive/aggressive question that I thought was quite incisive. "*If our system is broken, why don't we just go with a new system*?"

I redirected his comment to the Montana delegation and said, "Would you folks from Montana care to comment?"

The Montana legislators were well aware that the hidden question really was "*Why don't we move away from a democracy to something else — like fascism or authoritarianism*?"

Thaddeus Crow of Montana took that one on: "I have an opinion about what a government should do, what services it should

provide, and how it should operate. You may have an opinion that is 180 degrees different than mine. Under authoritarian rule, one side dictates how government is run; meanwhile, under a properly functioning democracy, both sides are heard. If the shoe were on your foot, your authoritarian leader could drive, I should say 'force' his or her ideas on me. I wouldn't like that at all. But if we both committed to a government that is willing to accommodate both sides, you'd be happy, and I'd be happy. Democracy has worked for 250 years in the United States, and we have all grown and prospered together because of it. Breaking democracy into total domination by one person, political party, and ideology will ultimately destroy our prosperity while infringing upon our civil and human rights."

Mr. Crow had been succinct, and I quickly interpreted his response. "So, what I'm hearing," I offered, "is that democracy works best for everyone, while authoritarianism only works for people willing to accept a single ideology."

Mr. Crow affirmed my comments. And I thanked him for his commentary.

It was time to move on, so I introduced the commentators next.

*

The commentators were supposed to discuss what they learned from the episode and offer suggestions for addressing polarization. So, for instance, they could have reinforced, as I had hoped they would, the concept that broken, one-sided partisan politics increase constituent polarization. But, nooooooo...

The AP news guy considered what the speakers and the audience had said and took a very "newsy" approach with his comments. He focused on how our broken government systems are causing chaos in our communities. He also talked about the legal conflicts that have become an everyday occurrence. He did not advise, as I

had wished, that people should stop their ideological battles and rely on their politicians to engage in bipartisan discussion.

The *Brookings Institute* guy then gave us his thoughts. "I think that the viewer who advocated for a singular, authoritarian governmental approach needs to understand, as the State Senator from Montana pointed out, that we're all in this together. This is not about one point of view controlling the rest; it's about a cooperative government weighing both points of view and coming to mutually acceptable decisions. This should not be political warfare; this should be governance working together to improve society."

This commentator sort of reinforced my key message: Polarization is bad *for all of us*.

The final commentator was the guy from the "*The Heritage Analysis Group."* And this guy did what I half expected him to do. He took an extreme right position and supported the audience member who had advocated for authoritarianism. "When you look at authoritarian government," he said, "you'll find several advantages over governments that constantly squabble and negotiate. Authoritarian governments are effective at moving legislation quickly because a single person is in control. Rapid decision-making leads to almost immediate implementation of policies. Strong internal controls lead politicians to work in unison to implement their leader's plan. And authoritarian governments offer strong internal controls — so the civil unrest that we're seeing now can be quickly suppressed. So, I believe the actual solution to our polarization problem is to eliminate the two opposing parties. Just have one party for everyone to follow."

*

What could I say to that attempt to completely undermine the purpose of my show? Or did it?

It took me a few seconds to recover from this little land mine, but I quickly summarized the commentators' comments. "It looks to me like all of our commentators agree that our political system is broken. And, based on what is going on in Wyoming, and the commentary you have just heard, some people believe that the way to fix our government is to ditch democracy and move toward authoritarianism. Others believe that governments work better when people work cooperatively to resolve issues. So, let's pick this discussion back up in Episode 2, '*How the U.S. Senate is broken — and what can be done to fix it.*"

I thanked the speakers and the commentators, then encouraged audience members to share their thoughts on the episode, positive or negative. I closed the show.

Chapter 65: Success — or Failure?

The camera went off, as did the digital wall, and that left me standing on my small stage, pondering what had just transpired. *Was it a good show? Did I accomplish my goals? Did what I just presented help promote bipartisan cooperation? Had it been a successful sounding board, as had been The Phil Donahue Show?*

*

I activated my mobile phone, and in the missed calls, the first message I saw was from Tito. I called him back immediately.

I put it on speaker as Rhea approached me. "Professor," Tito said excitedly, "have you seen what's going on over on the chat board?"

"I haven't yet, Tito. Fill me in."

"First, you had almost 15,000 people view your show. And almost 10,000 made it all the way through. And apparently, that 10,000 is feeling very chatty. You've got thousands upon thousands of comments. I think your show, for a first showing, is already a big success!"

The good news was that I had retained some of my old audience and attracted some new members.

But I worried. The show had denigrated too far into partisan territory for my liking. As I looked more closely at my episode schedule, I saw the same pattern recurring. And, as a result, I had a sense of impending doom, as if the show was still heading in the wrong direction.

Chapter 66: Viewer Feedback

The overriding reaction to our show was: "Nice try..."

I had hoped for, "*Thank goodness, finally, someone is identifying the problems with our broken government and opening up discussion channels between polarized voters.*"

After the show, Rhea reactivated the digital wall and pulled up the chat board. We both took some time reading what was being discussed in real time on the big screen. There had been well over a thousand comments on the show — and they seemed to adhere to partisan lines. People weren't bending; they were defending...

"In general, the comments are right or left, partisan," I told Rhea as I continued to scroll through the comments. It looks like viewers and listeners have become so attuned to taking a side that they aren't getting our message about breaking down polarity." Rhea agreed with me.

Still, I considered Tito's suggestion during our marketing preparation meetings. Be both honest and controversial. I think I accomplished both.

*

I called Tito back a short while later, after I had considered several of the audience comments.

"We've got a lot of reworking to do," was my comment, as I switched into show marketing mode.

"I think we need to do another *YouTube Short* with you reviewing what happened in the first show and *pointing out that your show is about breaking down polarity, not encouraging it.* We need to communicate to viewers that we're working on a new

mindset: a moderate, bipartisan one. What do you think?" Tito asked.

"I agree. We've got to get people out of partisan mode and into bipartisan mode," I surmised.

"If you'll record it, I'll upload it and promote it," Tito offered.

Rhea was standing there listening to our conversation. "Piece of cake," she told Tito and me. "I've got all of my video equipment already set up here. Professor, whenever you're ready, let's shoot it..."

*

I introduced Tito to Rhea via FaceTime shortly after we signed our contract. They seemed to work well together, almost in lock step. And they made quite a team — marketing smarts combined with technical savvy. I was confident that they made the perfect team to guide my show efforts...

"Let's do it!" I said, with enthusiasm. "Let's give it the old college try," I said, wondering where that idiom came from...

Chapter 67: The Congratulatory Call

It didn't take long to shoot my new *YouTube Short* promoting forthcoming shows. I took a few minutes to write down what I wanted to say. Rhea had me stand in front of the digital wall, which she activated with a bunch of show scenes running in the background, and I reiterated what we're trying to accomplish with this show. We titled that short, "Down with polarity, up with cooperation!"

Rhea sent the clip to Tito, who posted it and made my existing base and hundreds of new subscribers aware that my Short was available for viewing.

*

As Rhea and I wrapped up, I turned my phone back on and checked my voicemails and messages. The message that immediately caught my eye was from none other than Father Lucien Tremblay...

"Brilliant!" Father Lucien said as he opened our discussion. "Beyond my wildest dreams. You showed how broken the political system is, and you've made a plea to your audience to stop playing partisan and instead work toward common goals. That's the exact message I had hoped you would deliver when we had our fundraiser dinner in St. John!"

"Well, thank you, Father Lucien. Your kind words are much appreciated. Hey, I'm going to place you on speakerphone, if that's okay," I asked. "My technical assistant is with me, and I'd like her to hear what you have to say."

"By all means," Father Lucien responded.

"Father, this is Rhea Calderone. She's the brains behind making this show work technically," I said.

"Ms. Calderone," Father Lucien replied, "and I'm Father Lucien, Olivia's new friend. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"And you, too, Father. And please call me 'Rhea.'"

"I shall," Father Lucien responded.

"Rhea," I said, "can you explain your role in my show to Father Lucien?" Rhea told Father Lucien a little about her background, then explained her role at my show.

"Interesting," Father Lucien replied. "It takes only two people to run the show?"

"One to handle the technology and videography," Rhea affirmed, "and one star-of-the-show."

"Amazing," Father Lucien replied. He was taking notes.

"I've got to say," he continued, "that your show flow was well conceived. It created an interactive environment that fostered discussion and communication in a semi-public forum. People today are generally unable to have these types of discussions in public. But your approach opens the communications channels. It provides people with hands-off means to communicate with one another. It's like having a cushion layer, a buffer layer between the polarized camps. I think you've got a real winner in your new show."

I could also tell that he was pleased that his idea, my working on conquering the polarization issue, had made an impact.

He then abruptly changed the subject...

*

"Olivia," he started, "I've decided to run my own show — and I have permission from the powers-that-be to do so. I will use media literacy to establish the truths of issues that I will examine; I

will have an audience, just as you have; and at the end, I will have religious leaders provide guidance on how Catholics should look at the issues raised, highlighting the teachings of Jesus."

I was very much surprised by the good Father's teaching direction and his new project. He then provided more information. "We, here in Boston, have been losing congregants," he said by way of explanation. "And we believe that we've got to do a better job of online outreach. I have convinced the Bishop to let me do a show that provides targeted outreach to our Boston Catholic communities."

"Father," I said, "This is amazing news! And you're practicing what you've been preaching — using a show as a means to deal with important issues in our societies. I love the idea," I said.

"So now comes the hard part," Father Lucien intimated. "How do I get started with my project? And how do I replicate your format?"

I thought for a second, then replied, "Father, have you ever heard of a 'Look Book?'"

"I have not," he answered.

"Well, before we give you a definitive answer regarding the replicability of our format, I'd like to suggest that you create one. A Look Book is a short document that articulates your show's concept, explains its goals, and outlines the planned episode schedule. It's the kind of sales tool you should have at your disposal to sell your show concept. Can I send you my current Look Book so that you can see what I'm talking about?"

"I think that sounds very helpful. Please send it along," he requested.

We concluded our conversation with a commitment to review his Look Book and provide comments on how to replicate my show.

Chapter 68: My Look Book Cover

I think that very few priests have any experience with Look Books. I sat at my desk in the St. Mary's rectory and tried to imagine what a Look Book for my new show might look like. I had no idea what a Look Book was, so I looked it up. This brief report outlines a proposed show. It consists of a cover page, a vision statement that states the concept the reader is to understand, key imagery involving the show, complete with captions or short descriptions of those images, character profiles, technical or production notes, and a closing page. The purpose of this brief visual overview was to present the show in a clear, concise visual format. It works well because people understand visuals more quickly than text.

It sounds like a lot of work — and some of these Look Book requirements don't match what I'm trying to do, I thought.

I decided to wait for Olivia's Look Book before I undertook any action.

*

I received Olivia's *Look Book* via email the next day. Hers was different than the dictionary definition. Hers was a short presentation of about seven pages that included a cover page, a page outlining the goals of Oliva's show, a logline summarizing the show in a sentence or two, and a list and description of the shows she wanted to produce. It looked like a lot less effort than a formal Look Book.

I immediately began determining what I would use for cover art. I needed images or graphics to represent what my show would be about. And I had to merge them into a one-page visual — just as Olivia had done.

My cover page, I decided, had to show news being filtered through a media literacy approach; it had to show an audience listening intently or participating in a discussion; and it had to show Christ's teachings being followed. And, of course, I had to include a title for our show.

*

I started with the title. In a single word, what was the heart of the message I was trying to deliver? Three words came to mind: "truth," "voice," and "God." *How was I ever going to combine those three elements into a single picture as my cover art*?

I considered each element individually. I had to create a symbol for each component, something that visually represented each word.

I started with *truth*. And discerning the truth was all about media literacy. So, the question on the table was "how to draw media literacy?" I thought about what media literacy is — it is a method for weeding out lies and getting to the truth. Currently, Internet users have to examine multiple news sources to find accurate information. How could I depict that?

I started by going to *Google* and asking for a list of companies that use media literacy to filter out bias to present truthful news. I knew there were a bunch of companies that do this, but I didn't know their names, and I wasn't familiar with their specific offerings. I found 27 companies that aggregate and analyze news for bias. Still, the one I liked best was *Ground News* because it sought to identify Right/Center/Left biases and used a sliding scale to visually depict how each article or story leans.

I considered creating an AI picture that showed an article with a sliding scale at its base, just as Ground News does. But that image did not really describe media literacy; it was a result of media literacy. I wanted something more intuitive, simpler. What I

needed, I decided, was some newspaper articles with people examining them and somehow deriving truth from them. So, I physically grabbed a newspaper and leaned over it, searching for the truth. My eyes are not as good as they used to be, so I grabbed a magnifying glass to read a few of the articles, and then it hit me. My truth picture should include a newspaper and a magnifying glass, and the magnifying glass should be in the picture. And the magnified image should read "TRUTH." Now that I had an idea of how to depict media literacy, I described it to my AI program and asked it to create a picture of a magnifying glass checking an article for bias. This is what AI returned:

I moved on to the next word I wanted to focus on: "*voice*." I witnessed "voice" in action during Olivia's show when Olivia interacted with her virtual audience on her digital wall. I asked the AI: "*Can you create a picture of a priest interacting with a digital congregation on a digital wall?*"

After four tries with different picture descriptors, this is what AI came up with:

I loved it; it was exactly what I was looking for. I moved on to the final word I wanted to use: "*God*." And this was the most important word of the bunch. With the word "God," I was trying to convey that there are two ways to derive truth. There are secular, worldly truths — and we use these all of the time: human reason, evidence, and consensus. There is also a religious approach to understanding truth, in which truth is derived from divine revelation, sacred texts, and spiritual tradition. The whole point of my show was to remind Catholics that they need to understand the world using both approaches: a secular, reason-based approach and a religiously driven approach.

As an example of secular contrasted with religion, consider the Immigration situation in the U.S. People who take a secular view of the situation might see Immigrants empirically:

- What are they costing us?
- What are their crime statistics?
- Are they taking our jobs away?

And if these secularists assert that immigrants are taxing our healthcare systems (which they are not), committing all sorts of

crimes (crime statistics consistently show immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born citizens), and stealing our jobs (when most Americans won't pick a field of vegetables at the low wages offered). With their false assertions, they then advocate for the forced deportation of Immigrants.

The religious overlay I'm seeking examines the moral and spiritual implications of how immigrants are treated. Jesus would call for the protection of the vulnerable, for human dignity to be upheld, and for our response to the immigrant situation to be merciful, rather than for us to handle the situation to satisfy political or national identity goals.

The bottom-line message I want to get across is: *Catholics need to remember to follow Jesus' moral teachings — because that's what makes Catholics — Catholics.*

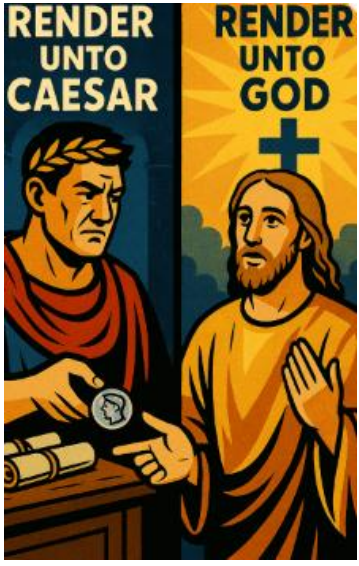
*

So, how could I illustrate my request to follow Jesus' teachings?

I thought about the conversation that I had had with the bishop regarding "*Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's.*" That would convey the message I wanted to deliver. But how could that be illustrated?

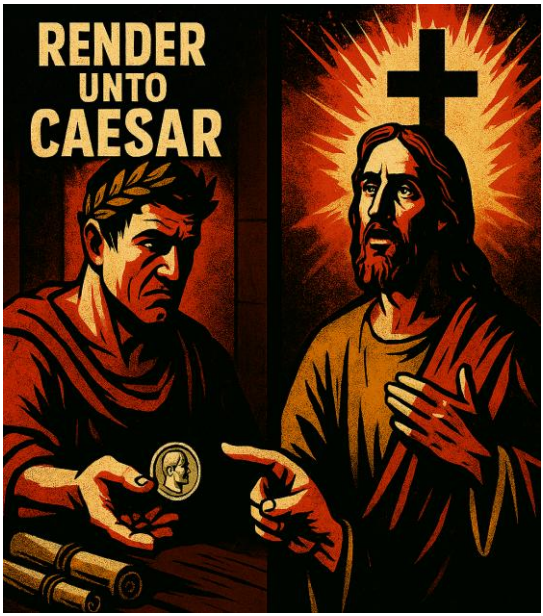
I asked AI to draw me a picture illustrating this Caesar/God division. Here's what AI came up with:

I found that interesting, but I wanted something more dramatic, so I asked the AI to render the next image in graphic novel form. And this was the result:



Too cartoonish, I thought... "Make it more dramatic, harsher," I asked my AI program.

And finally, I got what I was looking for:



*

Now for the most challenging part. What should I call this show? I grouped these pictures on a PowerPoint slide I view them together. I was hoping for inspiration...

To me, the show is about what our congregations are being asked to do in the secular world, and what they should overlay as Christians. So, I named the show, temporarily at least, until I ran the idea by the Council, "*The Rendering*." I created my cover page and placed all three graphics on that page. I liked the way it came out — straight and to the point!

I labeled each picture: the magnifying-glass one became "Media Literacy for Truth," and the digital wall became "Digital Congregation, Share Your Perspectives." The Caesar/Christ one became "*Secular Responsibility/Christian Morality*."

Under the title, I wrote: *Expose the Spin; Hear the Crowd;* and *Remember Jesus*.

I think this cover, I concluded, *captures the format and intent of my show*.

Chapter 69: *Completing My Look Book*

With my straw man cover art completed, I needed to develop a logline and a few goal *statements*.

The first thing I did was Google "log line." And Google provided the following formula: Effective loglines typically follow the formula: [Protagonist] + [Inciting Incident/Situation] + [Action] + [Stakes/Antagonist].

Following that formula, I wrote:

Protagonist (a Catholic priest, the emcee) + *Inciting Incident/Situation* (uses media literacy to ascertain truth) + *Action* (discuss with other members of the digital congregation) + *Stakes/Antagonist* (secularism would be the antagonist, while what is at stake is following secular laws too strictly, while ignoring Christian morality implications).

With these elements identified, I began drafting my logline and quick pitch for my Look Book.

First, I wrote: "*People are making decisions based on misinformation and lies. Using media literacy, people can ascertain the truth. Digital congregations should discuss these truths and evaluate truths based on their social and religious implications.*"

I read what I had just written over. It was horrible. *Would that make many people want to watch my show?* I thought. I doubted it.

I asked myself: *How can I get people interested in this show?* And I thought: *I've got to have some sort of conflict that gets resolved by making social and religious decisions.*

I ruminated on that thought. *What could my show conflict be? And how do I resolve it?*

I looked closely at the cover that I had just created. It had the three key show elements: "*Expose the spin. Hear the Crowd. And Remember Jesus.*"

But I need to change those sentiments into a short paragraph that will entice people to watch my show. So next, I wrote three potential log lines:

1. "A priest, using media literacy technologies, creates a digital environment that encourages congregations to discuss those truths openly, and shows those congregations how to interpret those truths in both a secular and a religious manner."
2. "In an era of digital noise, a media-literate priest uses a state-of-the-art media hub to guide his followers through secular pitfalls, fighting to keep the message of Christ at the center of their digital identities."
3. "A visionary priest battles the 'post-truth' culture from his digital pulpit, using media literacy to expose the secular deceptions that threaten to separate his digital flock from the core values of their faith."

I disliked my first log line; I kinda liked the second; and I kinda liked the third. So, I merged the best part of log line two and log line three together, and this is what I came up with:

"*In this era of inaccurate digital noise, a media-literate priest shows his followers how to use media literacy to expose secular deceptions that threaten to separate his congregation from the teachings of Jesus.*"

I reviewed my work, and I was pleased with the outcome. "*This will be my log line*," I determined. I then focused on defining my goals and objectives.

*

First and foremost, I want our congregations to remember that they have both secular and Catholic responsibilities. So, my first goal would be:

- *Reenforce that Catholics have both secular and Christian responsibilities.*

What else?

- *Learn how to validate your news sources in order to find the truth.*
- *Remind Catholics that being part of a congregation, whether physical or digital, is essential.*
- *Show Catholics the difference between secular thought and religious overlay — and get Catholics to understand that they need to use both in order to make decisions.*

Next came the tricky part. What topics would my episodes cover?

Chapter 70: *The Rendering*: Proposed Episodes

First, I listed many topics — secularism, immigration, the lies, and so on.

*

Because I needed to establish why I was doing this show, I started with the Church attendance situation. Here's what I came up with for the first episode:

Episode I: The Confusion: How Churches are Coming Apart.

I need something catchy here — and something controversial — and I thought this title would be a real eye-catcher. It indicates that something is broken and requires repair. So, there's a conflict that needs to be resolved.

To move forward, I had to identify a lie that could be exposed through media literacy. I would need the guests to present opposing views on that lie, thus creating a conflict. I would need viewers to comment on the speakers' presentations. I would need a resolution from the commentators that shows how to overlay Christian morality and values on the truths that have been discovered.

I now had a format and rough outline of the first episode. But I wasn't quite done. I had to rough-together perhaps five more episodes, present them to the Council for comment, and then inform the bishop of our proposed plan.

Simultaneously, I needed to share my Look Book with Olivia and solicit her feedback. If she approves, she and Rhea could help me determine the Internet technologies I would need to run my show.

*

Episode II: The Clash between "Procedural Secularism" and "Religious Morality.

I was not sure this title was controversial enough, but it did reflect what I thought the show should be about. The "big lies" are many as an authoritarian secular government looks to ride roughshod over religious morality.

The Epstein Files represent procedural secularism at its finest. They exemplify a government intent on using laws and procedures to prevent the release of potentially damaging files about politicians and their associates. For the victims' sake, the moral course is to release those files. That's what Jesus would want: transparency and integrity and restorative justice that would give love, mercy, and care to the abused.

I might also want to introduce my Russian analogy here, describing how the Russian secular authoritarian government restricts religious freedom, interferes with churches, and harasses church members. This is one of the strongest examples of secularism run amok that I can think of.

To balance this show, a key message should be that religious people should be able to live entirely religious lives. In contrast, secular people should be able to live altogether secular lives, with neither dominating the other.

*

I wanted *to include Episode III: Seeing Through the Narrative to discuss the misleading narratives the U.S. government is now advancing* that undermine Christian beliefs. I tried to teach viewers how to identify misinformation and, again, conclude the show with a discussion of Jesus' teaching on this matter.

*

In *Episode IV: The Secular vs. Religion Conflict*, I wanted to discuss "procedural secularism" versus "cultural religion." This is where we want our government to remain neutral when it comes to religion, allowing our culture to be free to choose secularism, religion, or both. This allows religious people to live entirely religious lives and secular people to live fully secular lives, without either dominating the other. But, in both cases, morality should be the foundation.

*

I was sure the members of the Bishop's Council would have other ideas and other priorities, so I stopped at the four episodes.

It was now time to arrange a Council review, seek their approval, make any edits, and then take the final Look Book to the Bishop. But before I did that, I sent a copy to Olivia for feedback.

*

The Council was impressed by my Look Book. It graphically conveyed what the show was about; articulated my goals and objectives; and proposed several potential episodes. There were no edits at the Council level, so off I went to see the Bishop...

Chapter XX: Olivia's and Rhea's Feedback

I received Father Lucien's Look Book only a day after I had suggested that he write one. It was exactly what I was looking for: visuals, goals, objectives, and episodes. After reviewing it, I now had a better understanding of what he was seeking to accomplish.

We, Rhea and I, scheduled a review session with Father Lucien at his earliest convenience.

*

We started our review session by telling Father Lucien that his Look Book was right on target. "I now understand exactly what you're trying to accomplish."

Rhea added, "Me too, and the good news is that it will be fairly straightforward to replicate Olivia's show, at least from a technical perspective."

"Father," I congratulated the priest, "This Look Book is outstanding. You nailed it. Great cover art, clear goals, and controversial episodes. I think you've got a winner here."

*

Father Lucien then took over the meeting with his list of questions.

"So, I have to ask you how you did your show technically. All of that Internet interaction was seamless, and the way you choreographed your screen motion kept my interest going. It didn't come off like one long lecture," Father Lucien asked me.

"Well, I have Phil Donahue to thank for that," I told him, then explained how I used the Phil Donahue Show as my model.

"I loved the Phil Donahue show when it was on," Father Lucien indicated. "It was a great way to promote controversial subjects. You chose the perfect model."

"Well, Donahue's show served as the format model," I stated, "but it was Reah's technical knowledge that proved the most valuable to me," I informed the good Father. "And my friend Tito did a fine job promoting our show."

"And you did an excellent job emceeing it," Father Lucien added. "So, here's what I want to know," he said, directing his question to Rhea. "The Bishop has asked me to come up with a plan on how to deliver our messages over the Internet. And I think your show model is the perfect delivery mechanism for my show. So, can you tell me how to replicate it technically?"

"You can use the same technologies as the Professor used," Rhea answered. "You'll need a microphone, a digital wall, and some camera equipment. But yes, your show lends itself perfectly to our format."

Rhea paused in order to allow Olivia to step in. "Perhaps you should tell Father Lucien how the marketing side of our show works," she suggested.

"We use Tito for marketing," Olivia told me. She had mentioned Tito before, so I was familiar with his name. But I had not yet been introduced to him. Olivia explained Tito's role and praised him as an Internet guru with substantial experience in social networking.

"Olivia," I asked. "Can you get me an audience with Tito?" Her answer was "Of course."

"And I'll come up with a list of the equipment that we used, and their cost in American dollars?" Rhea added.

Father Lucien now understood how to deliver his show.

Chapter 71: The Tito Marketing Discussion

Olivia, Tito, and I held a Zoom conference the next day.

"Tito," Olivia started, "I'd like to introduce you to Father Lucien Tremblay of Boston College. Father, here is the person who put together "*The Rendering*" Look Book that I sent to you."

"It's a fine job, Father. I'd even be interested in watching your show," Tito teased.

"A little dose of religion every once in a while is good for the soul," Father Lucien quipped back.

"So, tell me, Tito, what do I have to do to build an Internet following for my show?"

"There are about ten things that you should do," Tito answered. "And after I reviewed your Look Book, I listed them," Tito said as he held a sheet of paper before the screen."

"Nice work, Tito," I joined in. "So, you're going to tell him how to start his channel, how to build a base of followers, and how to grow that base — right?"

"Right on target," came Tito's reply as he started his presentation.

*

"The first thing you have to work on is building your CTR," Tito started. "You've got to..."

"Tito," I interjected, "Father Lucien probably doesn't know what a CTR is. It is *click-through-rate*."

"Thanks, Olivia," Father Lucien affirmed. "I didn't know that, and I still don't know why this is important."

"It's the approach you use to draw people to your channel," Tito replied. "You create a thumbnail that draws attention to your show."

"Is a thumbnail that snapshot you click on when surfing YouTube to choose a particular show?"

"Exactly," Tito answered. "A thumbnail is critically important. It grabs people's attention, communicates the topic immediately, makes people want to look at your show, and causes them to click on your show."

"So how do I create a thumbnail that draws them in?"

"I can help you with that," Tito offered. "And I think the artwork, the cover of your Look Book, might do the trick. We can play around with that and make it into an impactful thumbnail."

Tito glanced at his notes. "Structure is important. You've got to capture viewers' attention with something snappy up front; tell them what they're about to see; let them know that they will all be enlightened by the end. The object is to capture them; don't let them off the hook. So, whatever you do, follow a structure like the one I just described."

I added a quick insight. "Father, you want to keep people viewing your program for as long as you can. YouTube rewards you for doing that."

"Interesting," Father Lucien replied. "I hadn't thought of this show as a money earner."

"It can be. Not a lot of money, but enough to pay for some of your costs," I told him.

Tito waited for me to finish, paused, and then delivered his next marketing point. "The next thing to consider is 'are there any

shows like yours that are successful on YouTube?' If there are, and if they have good retention rates, mimic their formula."

"I don't think there is anything quite like what we have planned on YouTube, but I'll look into it," Father Lucien promised.

"Okay, then," Tito segued to the following marketing observation. "The next thing you have to do is get viewers to understand your format — and get them to like it. I think you have the key elements in your show to drive viewer engagement. Just copy what the Professor did with his show, and that format should drive viewership."

"Shows grow faster when the viewers know what to expect, what they're getting," I added.

Tito moved on to his next observation. "Shorts, those half-minute-long or so YouTube clips drive interest to your show. You should do shorts regularly — at a minimum before every episode that you release."

"I just did one for my show," I added. "They are really easy to do. Just put a few interesting, controversial thoughts together and record them."

"I hadn't planned on that," Father Lucien responded. "That implies that we're going to have a consistent speaker to represent us — because viewers will identify with that speaker. I'm going to bring this point up at the next Bishop's Council meeting."

"Only a few more points, Father." Tito smiled as he made his next point. "You've got to engage your audience as if it were a community. This means you need to get your viewers actively engaged with the ideas you're presenting. The key is to have a highly active comments section. You want people discussing what you're saying. And the good news here is that your whole show is about engagement — the engagement of the Catholic community.

The way you've laid out this show, and your episode topics, are sure to drive a lot of viewer attention and commentary."

I agreed with Tito. "You've got to engage your audience like a community. That's what Mary and I did with our reality show, and it became controversial, driving a lot of commentary."

"Point number seven," Tito said as he looked at his notes. "Collaborate with other shows and other hosts. They want to grow their shows, so they'll want to engage with you to blend their content with yours. And it works the other way, too. You'll want to engage with them to leverage their content. If you do this right, you'll capture their base, and they, yours."

Father Lucien acknowledged this point and made a note on his legal pad.

"Ready for three more?" Tito asked,

"Bring 'em on," Father Lucien replied.

"Okay, so the next point is 'consistency beats intensity.' You've got to get people trained to look for your show at a particular time, and a particular day of the week."

"Mary and I did that," I said. "We kept to a set schedule. People want that."

"Okay, so now for numbers nine and ten. And I think you've got these covered, but I'm going to make these points anyway. Number nine: make your show feel alive. And number ten, stay true to your formula. You've got media literacy; you've got moral framing based on Jesus' teachings; you've got institutional analysis based upon the 'truths' that you find; and you're telling a story — an interesting story. Stick with that formula — it will work every time. I promise."

"I think what Tito is saying is 'make your show the place where people go to understand why the news feels the way it does and seek spiritual guidance on how to react to that news."

"Exactly," Tito affirmed. "Oh, and incidentally, I'll send you these notes."

"That would be much appreciated," Father Lucien said as he looked at his own notes. "Tito, I greatly appreciate you taking the time to consider my marketing situation. These are all excellent points. I'll run each of these by the Bishop's Council and seek their comments. I'll then take all of this feedback to the Bishop to ensure he knows what we're doing. But, I say again, thank you for your help. Hopefully, someday, we can meet up so that I can personally thank you."

"No worries, Father. If you're in the neighborhood, drop in," Tito invited.

"The same to you, Tito. If you're down in Boston for any reason, stop in and see me at Boston College."

*

Tito's visit to Boston would happen sooner rather than later. After presenting his findings to the Bishop, Father Lucien invited both Tito and Rhea down to Chestnut Hill...

Chapter 72: The Council; The Bishop

Back at St. Mary's Rectory, I had laid out the show format. I had examined it from a financial and operational perspective. I gathered all of the cost data. I developed a marketing plan, and I presented it to the Council for review and to the Bishop for final review.

At the Council meeting, we discussed the YouTube Shorts that needed to be recorded. "We're going to need an emcee who becomes the 'face' of our show," I observed. The Council members agreed. "Does anyone have any candidates?"

No one offered a suggestion. You could tell that they had already had this discussion, but had not included me.

"I know a professional emcee, someone already in the entertainment business," I offered.

Father Acosta spoke up. I guess he had been elected the group spokesman.

"Nonsense," Father Acosta proclaimed. "You've got the presentation skills; you understand the key points in every episode. The show is largely your idea. We want you to host it!"

At first, I didn't like the idea of me as the emcee. Then I thought about Olivia. She had no entertainment training, and she and her show were very well received.

False modesty is frowned upon in priestly circles. So I answered, "I'd like to say 'no,' but I can't. I think I could do a bang-up job as emcee."

All of the Council members agreed.

*

I took all of my show materials, the final business plan, and the final cost data to the Bishop. He perused them while I sat in his office — and eventually he smiled.

"Well, then, it appears we're ready to launch this endeavor," he said as he reached out and shook my hand. "You'll be great at this, I just know it," he also put forward as a vote of confidence.

*

That was it. It had been decided that I would emcee. So now I was officially off to the races. It was time to launch my new show!

Chapter 73: The Second *middleground!* Show

I called Tito from my campus office in St. John. Tito and I agreed that new shows should be released, like clockwork, every two weeks on the same day and in the same time slot, so our audience would come to expect them and anticipate their arrival. In the meantime, I would pepper them with many *Shorts*.

I had gone off-plan with my first show, exposing dysfunction in state government. My original plan was to start at the federal level with dysfunction in the Senate, followed by dysfunction in the House. But the easiest target was the House, so I chose to dedicate my second show to exposing its dysfunction.

The target I'm referring to is the unprecedented, extended shutdown of the U.S. government stemming from the political divide between the Republican majority and the Democratic minority. Between October 1st and November 12th, 2025, the U.S. government shut down due to a lack of funding approval in the House. This shutdown cost the American economy approximately $11 billion in lost Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

This shutdown occurred for five reasons:

1. The Republicans and the Democrats could not agree on Department of Homeland Security (DHS) funding, with the Democrats demanding reforms to DHS practices such as roving patrols, masked agents, and greater accountability.
2. Congress is required to pass 12 separate funding bills each fiscal year, but Congress, by September 30th, 2025, had passed only six bills. The others were stalled because no bipartisan agreement could be reached on how to fund DHS, Defense, Labor, State, and Transportation.
3. The shutdown could have also been avoided if the House passed a clean continuing resolution (CR). A "clean" CR

simply extends funding without policy changes. But Democrats were insisting on policy changes.

4. As is typical today in the House, negotiations are typically shunted off to the last minute. And when those collapsed, the government shut down.
5. A willingness to shut down the government for political brinkmanship reasons also contributed to the problem. The way I saw this, this brinkmanship originated at the POTUS level when he refused to negotiate with Democrats, or even hold meetings with them. He also instructed his team to do likewise. The most glaring issue in this shutdown was healthcare, with the Democrats trying to make the Republicans look heartless by withdrawing funding for specific healthcare programs, and Republicans trying to make Democrats look uncooperative with the "mandate" voters had called for. Ultimately, the Democrats caved. But the failure to come to a bipartisan agreement cost American taxpayers billions of dollars.

My challenges were to identify speakers who could explain why this happened, steer the audience toward voicing outrage that it had been allowed, and find commentators to explain how this could have been avoided through bipartisan cooperation.

*

Rhea and I started this, our second show, with a graphic: *The Problems of Working Across the Aisle*," as a graphic stating the topic splashed across the screen. I then explained that today's show would cover the federal government shutdown, its causes, and what needs to happen to prevent a recurrence. I then introduced our speakers.

"Today we have Congressional Representative Rep. Amelia Wexler of Illinois, who represents the Democratic side of the

House; and Representative Charles "Chas" Pendleton III, who represents the Republican point of view."

"Shall we proceed?" I asked, starting with Representative Wexler. "Can you describe the problems that you, as a Democrat, are facing as you attempt to work on bipartisan solutions across the aisle?"

Congresswoman Wexler was seated on a couch, facing Representative Pendleton III. They were separated by about five feet of distance — close, but not too close.

"Thank you, Olivia. I'd be glad to share some of my thoughts on the challenges of compromise as we work to advance legislation that benefits the American people. And I'd be very interested in hearing Senator Pendleton III's perspectives on this matter."

"To me," she continued, as the camera zoomed in on her, "the current political dysfunction that we are now experiencing is not just about one party. It's about polarization, institutional design, and incentives to obstruct legislation. Our current political system is broken, and it is going to take a gargantuan effort by both parties to fix it."

The camera panned the digital wall to observe the audience's initial reaction. Everyone looked interested and pensive.

The camera then came back to Representative Wexler.

"What happens is that our Republican counterparts use obstructionist tactics, particularly around spending and election disputes. Their tactics include finding ways to exploit procedural rules, attaching unrelated provisions to 'must pass' bills, and killing legislation we support at the committee level."

Representative Wexler paused as the camera panned to Representative Pendleton III for his reaction. He did not look happy...

"I find the committee brinksmanship the most annoying," Representative Wexler continued. "They kill our bills at the committee level by never scheduling a hearing, pigeon-holing our bills and allowing them to expire. They hold hearings, but never vote. They outright vote our bills down, simply because they hold the House majority, and they stick together like a pack. They throw on amendments that subvert our bills, editing them so heavily that they become practically unrecognizable. And worst of all, they send our bills into subcommittees, where they never reemerge. They lie in a procedural graveyard."

The camera cut over to Congressman Pendleton III, and he was, curiously, smiling.

The camera cut back over to Congresswoman Wexler as she continued for her remaining time to malign Republican legislative abuses.

And all of the time, Congressman Pendleton III smirked...

When Congresswoman Wexler's time expired, I cut over to Congressman Pendleton III.

"Congressman Pendleton III," I said, "would you care to express the Republican point of view on these matters?"

"With pleasure," the Congressman replied as he looked at me. The camera then zoomed in on the Congressman as he articulated his case.

"First of all," he said, still smiling, "where do you think we learned all of these dirty little tricks?" The camera caught him focusing his question on Representative Wexler.

Congressman Pendleton III continued, trying to make the case that the Democrats are responsible for "committee-level obstruction."

"Look," he said, looking directly at Congresswoman Wexler, "these 'tactics' have been in use for over a hundred years — so you can't blame us for 'abusing' them. They're part of the process. In the case of committee tactics," the Congressman intimated, "the party that controls the House often controls the committee. And the party in power has the most influence over the bills that have been submitted."

He paused, then continued to explain the source of the problem. "I think that it must be noted that Democrats controlled Congress for almost sixty years, from the 1930s through the 1990s. And during that time, thousands of Republican bills have died in committee. Now that we're in control of Congress, the shoe is on the other foot. And your party," he again focused on Representative Wexler, "doesn't much care for that."

I was pretty pleased with the Congressman's diatribe. Congresswoman Wexler had come out guns-a-blazing, blaming the Republican Party for all of the government dysfunction. Congressman Pendleton III concurred that the government is broken and explained why. This was the type of message I wanted delivered to the audience.

"And frankly," he continued, "your party, because it has been in control for so long, is the cause of our current polarization situation. Under your watch, committee chairs became more partisan. And, accordingly, fewer bipartisan bills advanced. It was you guys who started using the practice of killing bills in committee to shut down our voices. And you're wondering why our voters, who have not been in control or heard for years, have suddenly become 'polarized?'"

The Congressman paused, then added one of the most sensitive proof points of what he considered Democratic malfeasance. "It was your party that did not build consensus with us over healthcare. You jammed the Affordable Care Act down our

throats, and by doing so, the topic has come up again and again, fueling shutdowns and stalemates."

The Congressman had done precisely what I had asked him to do. He admitted there were procedural and communication problems in Congress and explained why they had occurred. It was now time to turn it over to the audience.

*

As in the last show, the audience was divided along party lines.

"How could your party be so inhumane as to let Medicare for the elderly be killed?"

And then the bickering started, with comments like:

"You people overregulate us."

"Your party is responsible for government bloat."

"You're overtaxing us."

"Your immigration deportation policies are inhumane."

"Your stance on the rights of the LGBTQ+ communities is insensitive; it's like you refuse to understand that people's brains are sometimes wired differently."

I directed those statements to the appropriate speakers for their reactions, but the same thing that happened in the last show was happening again. *Partisan defense by a polarized audience...*

*

And then things changed for me.

One audience member asked the perfect question: "*When do you think this is going to stop*?"

The speakers could not answer that question; they appeared dumbfounded. Had they become so entrenched in their political trench warfare that they had not even considered trying to fix the problem?

I hoped the commentators could help dig us out of this mess...

*

I had chosen three commentators from organizations known for being bipartisan.

The first, a member of the *Congressional Research Service* (CRS), came prepared to provide insights on congressional rules, committee behavior, legislative strategy, and historical trends. The second represented the *Government Accountability Office* (GAO). This organization offers neutral evaluations of how Congress and federal agencies function. The final commentator hailed from the *Urban Institute*, an independent think tank known for performing deep policy analysis.

The CRS guy focused his "remedy" on the current broken process situation caused by the shutdown. "The shutdown was not inevitable. It resulted," as the Congressman had already said, "from a combination of policy disputes, missed deadlines, and political brinkmanship. An earlier compromise—especially on DHS funding—along with the timely passage of appropriations bills or a clean CR would have kept the government open." He had suggested a remedy for a specific Congressional malfunction, but he gave me the impression that there was no way to fix congressional contentiousness without a major government overhaul.

The GAO speaker admitted that her organization had, for years, pointed out to Congress that its process was broken. "No one listens," she said. "No one does anything. They don't want to upset the current power status quo."

Again, this did not inspire any confidence in me that this problem could be fixed. I did not see a bridge to break down the nation's polarity.

The final speaker, from the *Urban Institute*, said essentially the same thing — that the dysfunction is well known, and also admitted that no one is interested in fixing the system. He said, "*The curious thing is that our system incents our representatives to behave this way. And the only way this is going to change is if voters stop electing partisan politicians.*"

*

I talked with Tito after this show, and he informed me that our retention rate had dropped precipitously.

It was evident that our show was no longer hitting the mark. I had not done what Father Lucien had advised: I had not offered a solution to the problem. I kept asking myself how I could fix it.

And then I got a message from Clara Whitcomb, the professor at the University of Wyoming who had been a guest speaker during our first show. Her message read:

> "To better connect with your audience, you need to reread my book: *American Populism, Its History and Future Direction*."

She was right. And it was she who helped me determine yet another new and very impactful direction for my show...

Chapter 74: Tito Meets Rhea

I informed the Bishop about my meeting with Olivia, Tito and Rhea.

"Why don't you fly them down here to Boston, get some Boston College students to work with them, and get your students over at the College to learn how to produce your show?" he suggested.

Before he could respond, he told me, "I've already allocated the money for their travel and lodging. So you might as well do it."

I replied, "And why not? Those two know what they're doing. They can help set up my studio, and I can rehearse with them before the big day."

"When is the big day — have you decided?"

"I wanted to stream my first show on the second Friday of February, but that's Friday the 13th, and I decided not to tempt fate," I joked. We, priests, are not allowed to be superstitious.

The Bishop laughed. Thank goodness.

*

Both Tito and Rhea accepted my invitations. Tito flew into Boston from Bangor, and Rhea flew in from St. John. I housed them at the Park Plaza in downtown Boston and met them there later that afternoon.

Tito arrived early — at around 10 a.m. — so he took the opportunity to tour downtown Boston. He found his way to the Freedom Trail, a walk through Boston's historic district that brought him to the *Old State House*, by *Government Center*, over to the *North End* — the Italian section of town with dozens of excellent restaurants, and circled him back to the hotel. Near the Old State House, the National Park Service has a tourism center

and a small, informative museum that describes Boston's history from the Pilgrim days through the present. And there he met Rhea for the first time.

*

"I know you!" he said when he first spied Rhea.

Rhea hesitated, and then a smile broke across her face. "Tito?"

Tito also grinned. "The one and only," he affirmed.

"Well, it's great to meet you finally!" Rhea, still smiling, extended her hand.

"Wow, you look completely different in person," Tito exclaimed. Her bustline had definitely caught his eye.

"Hey, are you hungry?" Tito added. "It's time for lunch. There's this market down the street called *Quincy Market*. How about we head there for some pizza?"

"I'm starved," Rhea answered, "I've only had coffee on the plane. Nothing else. So let's go!" she said with enthusiasm.

She had checked him out, too. Shorter than she thought he'd be, but look at those arms! *This guy must be an athlete. And he's cute — with those warm brown eyes and winning smile. This is going to be fun...*

*

At *Quincy Market*, Tito and Rhea stumbled upon Pizzeria Regina, a Boston staple with locations in the North End, Quincy Market, and other places Tito had never heard of, like "Braintree." Was there really a town named "Braintree?" However, the line was long, and Tito told Rhea he lacked the patience for long lines. "Plus, we have to get you fed pronto," he insisted.

As they headed out the side entrance of the market building, Rhea saw a sign for "*The Boston Chowda Company*." "That sounds interesting," Rhea offered.

There was no line, so Tito immediately agreed, and they were shown to their table. Now seated, they ordered "Boston Schrod," which was really a flaky white fish, probably cod. And each had some of what they considered the best chowder they had ever had.

Over lunch, they talked about their respective roles for Father Lucien's show, and then things got personal.

"So, tell me about yourself, Rhea. Where are you from? Is your family local? Do you have a bunch of brothers and sisters?"

"I'm an only child," Rhea let Tito know. "Like you," she added. "Olivia told me all about what happened to your father," she said sympathetically. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, Rhea, for your concern," Tito responded, and quickly changed the subject back to her upbringing. She could tell that Tito was uneasy talking about his father, so she dropped that discussion.

"I grew up in St. John," she told Tito. "Went to school there, went to college there, and now I own my own business," she told Tito, who was already familiar with her background through Olivia.

Tito's reaction to Rhea, now that he had seen her in person, was one of high interest. He found Rhea highly attractive, with her big brown eyes, luscious lips, and curvy figure. And those... But the question at the top of his mind was "*Does she have a boyfriend?*" How could he subtly find that out?

Rhea smiled. She had already anticipated his question. "And, no, I don't have a boyfriend," she let him know.

The line from the Humphrey Bogart movie "*Casablanca*" flashed into his mind. "*Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship*...." Only Tito substituted "Rhea's" name for "Louis."

*

Father Lucien met Tito and Rhea at five o'clock at the *Park Plaza*.

He has a real presence in person, Tito thought, as did Rhea.

Pleasantries were exchanged, details of their day in Boston were shared, and then Father Lucien made an offer. "I'd like to take you to the absolute best seafood restaurant in Boston if you're interested. It's called *Legal Seafood*. We can walk there from here; it's probably about a mile. Or we can take the *Red Line* subway train."

"Let's walk," both Tito and Rhea exclaimed. And on their way to Copley Place, Father Lucien gave them a city tour of old graveyards, adjoining churches, *Boston Common*, the *State House*, and up the main shopping street, *Newbury Street*. They cut over to *Boylston Street,* where the BPL *Boston Public Library* is located, and on to Copley Place, where Legal Seafood is now located.

Over dinner, Father Lucien asked a ton of questions about how Tito structured his marketing plan and how he could expand his distribution beyond the Boston area.

Father Lucien then discussed with Reah his equipment setup and use at his makeshift studio in the former campus bar area known as the "Ratskeller," or, as the students called it, "The Rat."

"The Rat started serving students in the 1970s, but bit the dust in 2007 when Boston College renovated McElroy Commons, where the Rat was situated," Father Lucien explained. "And now my studio is located in the former stage area of the Rat. It's an ironic,

perfect location," he beamed. "And I've nicknamed my studio '*The Rat*" in honor of its former tenant."

Reah and Tito both got a kick out of Father Lucien's stories.

Over dinner, plans were made for the following day: an equipment review by Rhea, introductions to Father Lucien's technical and videography staff, and to the students who would be helping with the social networking blitz.

*

"This new studio is 'immaculate,'" Rhea observed as she entered the new facility. And yes, she was fully aware of her pun. She conducted an equipment review, performed some preliminary testing, and showed the video staff how to orchestrate the videography and operate the digital wall.

Tito found himself in a computer lab, teaching a group of six students how he approached digital distribution of Olivia's shows.

The day ended with Tito, Rhea, and a contingent of students venturing over to the *Cityside Tavern* in Brighton. It was not quite a dive, but it was casual, loud, and student-heavy. Plus, the floors were sticky, as every good dive bar should be.

*

Tito and Rhea took "The T," the name for Boston's rail transit system, back to the Park Plaza late that night. They made plans to meet for breakfast and then head back to their respective homes from Logan Airport.

"When we get back, we should make plans to get together again," Rhea suggested.

Tito agreed. Wholeheartedly...

Chapter 75: The "Father Lucien Show"

Before his initial episode, Father Lucien became the source of constant teasing by his fellow Jesuits. In jest, they had taken to calling his new show "*The Father Lucien Show*," as opposed to its real name, "*The Rendering*."

And then the requests started to pour in. "*Can I have your autograph*?" several priests teasingly asked. And, "*Will you be making any late-night appearances on Colbert or Kimmel*?" And, of course, "*When you're rich and famous, will you still remember us*?"

Teasing aside, the show launch day finally arrived. It had been set for February 20th. It had been rehearsed a dozen times. The speakers were chosen. A large contingent of Boston College students planned to attend digitally, as did priests and clergy from all the local churches. The two commentators chosen were impressive. They included the Bishop, and even the Cardinal! This show was going to be a significant event — a huge deal.

*

As Olivia had done with the first episode of her show, I spent a few minutes outlining the show's purpose and format. I told the audience that speakers will discuss various big lies that we expose through media literacy practices; the speakers will be followed by audience commentary; and the audience feedback will be followed by Commentators who will link the topic being discussed to Jesus' teachings.

The title of episode one was "*The Confusion: How Churches Are Coming Apart*."

*

The "big lies" that I chose to address in the first show were the lies being put forward by *Christian Nationalists'* view of the world, that

the U.S. needs to become a Christian country with special privileges for Christians, among others.

For speakers, I was able to enlist Beth Morse, an Evangelical author and speaker who has regularly spoken out over the dangers of merging partisan identity with Christianity. I also recruited Perry Williams, co-author of a best-selling book titled "*Christian Nationalism/The Christian Fundamentalist Agenda*." These two speakers would use media literacy techniques to show the audience how to expose lies, such as the claim that Christian Nationalism is right for our country.

I had made several YouTube *Shorts*, per Tito's advice, to drive viewership. We had about 5,000 click-throughs on each Short, but we really had no idea how big the audience for the first show would be.

As for the commentators, I worked closely with the Bishop on relating the teachings of Jesus to the Christian Nationalist theme. And I compiled an extensive list of suggestions for the Cardinal in order to prepare him for the show.

And finally, showtime arrived.

*

After my introduction, I turned it over to the first speaker.

"My staff and I," began speaker Beth Morse, "spent quite some time sifting through Internet articles looking at the claims that Christian far-right Christian Nationalists are making to justify their existence. These claims fall into five broad categories. I'll discuss those in a few minutes. But first, let me say that media literacy isn't about attacking people; it's about examining claims, evaluating evidence, and applying logic to support a conclusion."

"Claim 1: *America was founded as a Christian nation*. This is simply *not* true. The U.S. Constitution contains no reference to

Christianity — that's a big zero! It has no reference to the Bible. The First Amendment prohibits the government from establishing an official religion.

"Their logic test required us to examine the origins of these Christian Nationalist beliefs. To justify their movement, Christian Nationalists are cherry-picking quotes from various sources and taking them out of context. Conclusion: There is no justification for this argument."

She paused, then scrutinized Claim 2.

"Claim 2," she continued, "*Christianity should have a privileged place in public life*. Our media literacy test proved that the First Amendment prohibits government favoritism toward *any religion*. The reasons behind this claim are many, but we found one that typified this argument; it is called the 'Majoritarian fallacy,' and states that 'most Americans are Christian, so the government should be." In short, this claim contradicts constitutional law and relies on fallacies rather than evidence."

Pause.

"Claim 3," she continued. "*Christians have a duty to rule or 'take dominion' over society*. This argument comes from modern dominionist theology, a fringe movement. It assumes that one group's theology should govern everyone. Following this fallacy would make us like certain Muslim countries. And how's that working out for them?

"Claim 4," she continued, "*Christian morality protects the nation from decline*. We found no empirical correlation between Christian dominance and national stability, safety, or prosperity. In fact, we note that highly secular countries such as Norway, Japan, and New Zealand consistently rank among the safest, most prosperous, and most stable. In short, this claim relies on fear-based rhetoric, not evidence."

"And, finally, Claim 5," she set up for her conclusion. "*Pluralism has gone too far — Christians are being marginalized.* Using media literacy, we determined that Christians still make up the majority of the U.S. population; that they are over-represented in Congress; and they are dominant in U.S. cultural and political institutions. What's going on here is that these Christians are assuming that equality for others means a loss for themselves personally. This is a victimhood narrative with no basis in fact."

"Back to you, Father," she concluded.

I was impressed. This was exactly what I meant by using media literacy to discover truths.

"Thank you, Ms. Morse, for presenting your research."

I then turned my attention to the next speaker, Perry Williams, the author of the book on the Christian Nationalist fundamentalist agenda. He spoke for five minutes on what the country would look like under the control of Christian Nationalists, per his research using media literacy to portray this new country.

His best quote was, "You can't let them hijack the United States Constitution in the name of Christ. This is a perversion; their fundamentalist agenda goes directly against Christ's teaching in oh so many ways."

I was very pleased with my speakers. They had identified lies and beliefs that permeate the streaming Internet; they had used media literacy to prove that the agenda the Christian Nationalists is pushing is based on half-truths, innuendo, selective quotations, and just plain outright lies.

*

When the speakers concluded, it became time for audience participation. And that's when things really livened up.

As I randomly selected audience participants on my digital wall, I was shocked to find that there was actually a wealth of students and other viewers who supported the Christian Nationalist agenda.

The first person I selected was an older lady, perhaps seventy years old. She wore thick glasses, had her grey hair up in a bun, and wore a designer top. In the background was a bookshelf crammed with books. There were a few romances in her book mix, as well as several books on Christianity.

"I don't necessarily think that all of the issues your speakers have with Christian Nationalism are true. There are some positive elements. For instance, aligning our public policies with Christian values. The Church sets our moral compass. We should all behave in a manner consistent with Church teachings."

I had no idea which speaker I should turn this one over to, so when the camera panned back to me, I simply said, "Would either of you speakers like to comment on our viewer's perspective?'

Beth Morse was quick to answer. "That argument presupposes that Christianity is the finest religion in the world, and hence everyone should be subject to its dictates and doctrines. My response is 'How would you like it if you professed to a different religion, but your country's laws only supported Islam, for instance?'"

The author, Perry Williams, who has specialized in this area, joined in. "The first problem with linking secular law directly with the Christian religion is that fundamentalists bend Christianity to suit their own agendas. So, if they believe that their religion should dominate, they tend to deny freedom of religion to others. If they don't believe in gender equality, their laws will reflect that. If they don't acknowledge that there are really LGBTQ+ people in this world, their laws criminalize same sex relationships. And, in some countries, where a particular religion dominates secular

law, corporal and capital punishments such as flogging, amputation, and stoning are allowed. I don't think I'd want to live in that United States."

Beth Morse wanted to add more, but I shifted the conversation back to the audience.

"You've all heard what media literacy investigations yield about alleged Christian Nationalist truths. And our last viewer indicated that there are some positive aspects of Christian Nationalism. Would anyone else care to comment on that?"

I chose a male student as my next selectee. He had wavy, blonde hair, a goatee, and was wearing a Boston College t-shirt.

"I was wondering which version of Christianity the backers of Christian Nationalism are endorsing as the Christianity we should all follow. Is it Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Baptist, or what?"

I smiled. This student had hit on an important point. I again turned the discussion over to the speakers.

"You are 100% right," Beth jumped in. "There is no universal version of Christianity. There are many interpretations of Christ's words. And that means that it's up to the government to select which interpretations they will adopt and enforce. And we all know that governments will tend to enforce interpretations that serve their own political interests."

That was good, short, and to the point. I quickly switched back to the audience. I chose an Asian man, perhaps thirty years old, who asked: "I wonder if running the United States as a Christian nation would have an effect on racism. Would anyone care to comment on that?"

Perry Williams responded. "Is there a racist element to Christian Nationalism?" he restated. "First off, Christian Nationalism is not

inherently racist. But white Christian Nationalism is a special case. If you go to an all-white church, you'll often find lower tolerance for racial and ethnic minorities. In fact, some of these churches openly tolerate openly racist individuals. What I'm saying is that 'white Christian Nationalism' often functions in a way that reinforces racial hierarchy."

We had time for one more comment or question, and this time I chose a redheaded woman who appeared to be of Irish-Catholic heritage. She was, I think, somewhere in her forties.

"I was wondering what the Catholic Church's position is on Christian Nationalism. There are, after all, Catholics who believe in it."

"This is the perfect segue to the Commentator segment of our show," I replied, as the camera panned from me to the commentators. The Bishop was there in the studio, while the Cardinal participated via stream. Our students did an excellent job handling this segue. They had the Bishop sitting on a couch, while the Cardinal was portrayed on the digital wall.

The Cardinal spoke first. "Our church," he said, "consistently warns against Christian nationalism. We endorse 'healthy patriotism,' but nationalism is different. We find that fusing religious identity with state power often distorts our faith and contradicts core Catholic principles. Christianity is universal, not tied to any single nation, and the state must never dominate or instrumentalize the Church."

Perfect. A short, concise answer packed with guidance.

"Bishop?" I asked.

"The Catechism affirms that it is okay to love your country as part of the 'order of charity,' but we warn against idolizing your nation,

or placing it above God. A Catholic may love their country, but must never treat it as sacred or superior to others."

The Cardinal joined in. "In short, the Catholic Church supports healthy patriotism but rejects Christian nationalism because it distorts the Gospel, subordinates the Church to political power, and contradicts the universal nature of Catholic faith."

We were running out of time at this point. I thanked the Bishop and the Cardinal and quickly relayed some upcoming parish events.

"That's it for now," I closed. "I wish to thank you all for your attendance, and I hope we've clarified the Church's stance on Christian Nationalism. Please feel free to comment on this show, either positively or negatively. And may God bless you."

*

I felt bad that I had not allotted enough time to the Bishop and the Cardinal, but the introduction, where I described the goals and objectives of the show, as well as the format, burned some of my presentation time. And announcing Church activities at the end of the show burned an extra two minutes. I think that section of the show should, perhaps, be eliminated.

*

According to my three-person staff of social media managers, we had over 5,000 viewers — an excellent start. And those students projected that we would get more over the next few weeks, possibly reaching 10,000, provided I followed up the show with several Shorts that would attract new viewers to our stream.

Overall, the reviews were very positive — but bear in mind, many of those who commented were members of the clergy, or students at the College. It was essentially preaching to the converted. We'll see if the next show broadens our audience...

Chapter 76: A New Direction: Populism?

Professor Clara Whitcomb had been a speaker at my first *middleground!* show. She had been very well received. I liked her and respected her, and I find her exceptionally knowledgeable about historical events in PoliSci.

Clara had watched my second show and saw the difficulty I was having getting people to break out of their polarization shells. And after that second show, she had messaged me with a cryptic message saying:

> "*Olivia: To better connect with your audience, you need to reread my book: American Populism, Its History and Future Direction.*"

That was all she said. She left the rest to me to figure out why she thought a reread was important. She piqued my curiosity, and I began to search my office bookshelf. I found her book and began perusing.

*

Almost everyone who writes about "*populism*" begins by noting that it is difficult to define. And it is. Some people call it a form of logic; others describe it as a political approach that focuses on "the common people" versus the elite. I simply describe it as a popular movement meant to articulate the *voice of the people*." Candidates who echo that voice can be liberal, conservative, or moderate, depending on the message the populace wants echoed.

As I considered populist movements, I asked myself, *Is this my first clue as to why Clara wanted me to reread her book? She wants me to focus on the authentic voices of the people, not the issues Republicans and Democrats are pushing.* And I wondered: What, in this day and age, are the American people saying *they want? What is the authentic voice of the people?*

I kept reading.

*

To illustrate the "*voice of the people*" concept, the Professor delivered a history lesson on how populist movements have operated historically.

She could have started, I thought, with President Andrew Jackson's populist platform, with the same theme of the common man versus the elites, but she paid little attention to that event. And she also paid scant attention to the *Antebellum Nativist Populism* of the 1840s through the 1860s. That's when the voice of the people focused on fears of non-Protestant immigrants taking over America. *This sounds familiar...* I thought.

Eventually, she moved on to discuss the rise of American populism from the post-Civil War period through the early 1900s. She sees that period as the true origin of populism in this country.

In the 1870s through the early 1900s, farmers and laborers joined forces to pressure the U.S. government to change monetary policies that favored wealthy *Gilded Age* millionaires. Incidentally, this theme, the people versus the rich or elites or big government, is common in every populist push.

Inflation was killing farmers at the time, and the rich kept getting richer and the poor poorer. *Again, sounds familiar*...

These farmers and laborers advocated for an eight-hour workday; they lobbied for business regulation to curb predatory practices; they wanted the government to regulate railroads because the railroad robber barons were jacking-up prices for distributing farm goods; and so on. Due to Republican and Democratic intransigence, their protection of their wealthy donors, and their minimization of the issue of wage inequality due to capitalism-gone-wild, the people, the voters, sought another option.

Out of frustration with Democrats and Republicans, a populist party was created by "the people" and existed from 1892 through 1908. At that point, the Republican and Democratic parties finally adopted several populist principles, and the Populist Party faded into obscurity.

I considered what the Professor was writing about. *During this period of intransigence, political parties pushed their own agendas and ignored public sentiment. The Republican and Democratic Parties wouldn't bend. The people formed their own party to advance their agenda. Hmmmm...*

*

Populism faded away in the early 1900s, but it returned with a vengeance during the *Great Depression* of the 1930s. Americans during the depression were experiencing extreme financial hardship. And the government, under the leadership of Republican Herbert Hoover, failed to address the American people's economic recovery needs adequately. A large share of the American public wanted government help, but it was not forthcoming from the Hoover administration or the Republican Party in general. And that's when a populist movement resurfaced.

At this juncture in history, people, in general, wanted the federal government to institute relief, and they got that wish under the auspices of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's *New Deal*. Under FDR, the federal government assumed responsibility for delivering social care to American citizens, marking a massive shift in the government's role. That's when the government got involved in providing welfare aid and jobs to needy citizens. And that's when these past decades of squabbling over the role of government as a social welfare institution really began.

During the 1930s, other populists joined the fray, including Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest with a massive national radio

audience. He was known for mixing economic populism with conspiracy-tinged rhetoric.

There was also Huey Long, a former Governor of Alabama and later a Senator, who promoted his message of economic equality through his "*Share our Wealth*" missives. As I considered Huey Long's role, a thought occurred to me. At this point in history, we had FDR and his populist presidency; we had Father Coughlin and his twisted logic; and we had one more: Huey Long.

That's three influential politicians claiming to represent the voice of America. And that made me wonder: *How do you actually determine who truly represents the voice of the American people? The current regime thinks they've been given a mandate by the American people to ignore Constitutional safeguards to get rid of immigrants and deny protections to people of color and the LGBTQ+ communities. Do the majority of Americans really favor tearing down the Constitution and the rule of law in America in order to create a White Nationalist/Christian Nationalist state?*

The Professor went on to explain how Truman continued the benevolent government motif by supporting programs that advocated for national health insurance, public housing, anti-discrimination in hiring, aid to education, a minimum wage, farm supports, government involvement to drive full employment, and civil rights. Interestingly, his proposed national health insurance, anti-discrimination in hiring, aid to education, and farm support were all blocked by legislators who wanted less government intervention into assistance and education. And, of course, Southerners didn't cotton to Truman's anti-desegregation position.

Our country's division also manifested in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement, and later with attempts to curb Women's rights.

Our division was also manifest in the 1970s when Nixon was in power, until he was impeached.

In the 1980s, we saw the rise of the *Radical Right* under Ronald Reagan. Under Reagan, the concept of "*trickle-down economics*" was introduced — the idea that if the government would give tax cuts or provide financial benefits to wealthy individuals and large businesses, the belief was that these tax breaks would result in investment, expansion, and job creation, which would eventually "trickle down" to everyone else in the economy.

In the 1980s and 1990s, populists pushed anti-tax, anti-bureaucracy, and anti-Washington themes that gained traction. Their message was often framed as ordinary taxpayers vs. big government.

At this point in history, I saw the end of bipartisan politics. In the 1980s and 1990s, I noticed the Republican push to centralize power in the Executive Branch. And I also noticed a significant increase in hate rhetoric.

Republicans started to harp on jobs being stolen by coddled minorities and immigrants, how their taxpayer dollars were being squandered on social programs, how the government was giving special privileges to minorities and the LGBTQ+ communities, and how the Democratic Party was undermining their shot at the American Dream.

The "hate" rhetoric then became a two-way street, amplifying the polarization of both parties... Based on the way I have been treated over the years by some Americans, my personal experiences as a transwoman have led me to I believe it's easier to *hate* rather than *love*. The hate messaging really ramped up during this period.

In the 2010s–2020s, populism resurged on both left and right, driven by economic inequality, distrust of institutions, and political polarization.

At this point in her book, Professor then broke into a discussion of *The Tea Party* (2009–2016). I closely tracked that movement — it was groundbreaking. The long and the short of this movement was that the middle class felt that, with government regulation and equality programs, other non-deserving people were getting a shot at the "*American Dream*" that white people were *more* entitled to.

On the liberal side of populism, according to the Professor, you now have Bernie Sanders emphasizing economic justice, anti-corporate power, and universal social programs.

On the conservative side, our current POTUS represents a form of cultural and nationalist populism, complete with anti-establishment rhetoric, distrust of experts, and crisis exaggerations designed to incite and mobilize supporters.

*

So, what was the lesson learned after rereading Clara's book?

Perhaps, trying to scale the divide between our polarized people, I should shift to a new approach. I should, possibly, steer the show toward promoting a new Populist movement.

And, as I thought about how my show flags because of polarization adherence by my audiences. They just won't compromise, I concluded that Clara may be right on target!

*

I spent the evening considering how a new populist movement could be established in the U.S. and how it could change our polarized parties.

The following morning, I decided to model out my ideas. Time for another Look Book...

Chapter 77: The Shoe Drops

Alex called. As expected, he'd been fired. The "*Department of Justice*" had successfully executed its *Regulation by Prosecution* plan. Alex accepted his fate. He had spoken out and had been punished for it. His *First Amendment* rights had been violated, and the *Freedom of the Press* had been trampled...

"It started, as I expected, with the Department of Justice approaching our news organization innocently. 'We need to do an audit of your business practices,' they claimed. So, a letter arrived from the Justice Department announcing the government's intent. Just routine, they claimed..."

"Yeah, sure," I affirmed.

"First, we want to look at your advertising disclosures. We want to be sure they are 'thorough and accurate,'" Alex continued. "This is framed as a routine inquiry, but it is clearly a first volley in a battle yet to come. It's like saying 'we're going to hassle you on this, and if you don't stop streaming stuff that goes against our dogma, there will be more interference to come..."

"Clearly government intimidation," I agreed.

"So, then they added, 'We want to look at your data handling policies, procedures, and practices. Please provide details on your streaming partners.' This data was then used to hassle our streaming partners. The DOJ was trying to wreck our distribution relationships."

I shook my head in agreement. "This is clear harassment!"

"Our lawyers were convinced that they would also try to hassle our CDNs."

"Wait a minute," I asked. "What's a CDN?"

"It's a *Content Delivery Network*; it consists of the servers we use to distribute our content geographically. Those servers are designed to deliver web content, you know — images, videos, scripts, downloads, etc. — closer to users, improving speed, reliability, and performance."

"Okay," I said, just to be sure I understood the concept, "so they're bothering your CDNs to do what?"

"Withdrawing services and increasing complexity. They ask them to implement new verification steps, temporarily throttle our bandwidth, and/or initiate stricter compliance checks and delay approvals for scaling bandwidth. And the next thing you know, we get delays in our broadcasts as streams start to buffer. And our viewers won't suffer buffering for very long..."

"They can do that?" I asked.

"They appear to be doing it behind closed doors. They look for zealot sympathizers to their cause, and subterfuge magically happens."

I was surprised and amazed. I had no idea that the DOJ was still underhandedly using *Regulation by Prosecution*.

"But wait, there's more," Alex continued, using the parlance of late-night knife salesman advertisements. "We've also received a request to conduct a '*copyright audit*' on some of our news stories. They suggest that some of our broadcasts may contain copyrighted material or proprietary insights. That puts undue pressure on editors. They think, '*I can be found in violation of a copyright, so I'll withhold this news story because I'm afraid of retribution or legal action.*' Lawyers get involved. The news organization must defend itself. It chokes news delivery."

Unbelievably, Alex continued...

"Next, they go after your social media partners," Alex added. "Our partners receive a request for cooperation. And that causes those partners to demonetize your streams by obscuring them, imposing age restrictions on news stories like ours, and flagging videos for review. And all of this affects our bottom line..."

"They can't do this," I insisted.

"They're doing it regardless," Alex responded. "So now, at PCPTV, we were seeing our lawyers advising caution on a wide range of fronts. That crippled all of our reporting. We have editors 'spiking' stories. Did you see what CBS did on *60 Minutes* last month?"

I was aware that a conservative right editor who has been placed in a position of control at CBS killed a story about the CECOT prison, the one that they sent Manny to, where Manny died.

"I did," I affirmed. "It's another attempt by the administration to control their violation of human rights."

Alex's voice quivered.

"This editor said that she wanted the reporter to interview Stephen Miller or another senior Trump official before she would allow the story to be broadcast. And those officials have refused to be interviewed. And it smells to us in the news business, as it smells to Democrats and to foreign countries, that this story spike aligns with POTUS 2025 initiatives, and was clearly politically motivated."

I was dumbfounded. "They spiked the story at the behest of POTUS and his people?" I asked.

"No proof. But, as I said, it *smells* like it."

Alex paused. You could tell he was smiling on his side of the call. "You should know, however, that a Canadian station failed to

spike the story and broadcast it. Some viewers recorded the story and posted it. And it has gone viral!"

I, too, smiled. I then said: "So did the editor do that because she feared government reprisals, or because the story wasn't 'complete?'" I asked.

"Maybe a little of both," Alex suggested. "But if editors start spiking stories, whistleblowers and informants will no longer come forward. Why would they? They would have reported government wrongdoing to a news organization, and the government would know their identities. And reprisals aimed at them would likely be in order."

"So, in essence," I observed, "they don't shut you down, but they make it very difficult to do business as usual."

"Precisely. But they add one thing. At some point, they indirectly go after specific personalities within organizations. And I happen to be one of those personalities. That's why they came after me, Olivia. Me!"

I hesitated to formulate my next question. "So, what is the network going to do?" I asked.

"They've caved in as a result of strong government interference in their business."

"Well," if you're unable to find a new position in Bangor, let me know. I've got some ideas that may work for you," I hinted.

"If I can't, I'll be back to you," he promised.

Chapter 78: What's Next?

After Alex's call, I became even more determined to take action against the rogue U.S. government. My effort to open a dialogue between the polarized Democrats and Republicans was failing. I'd do a few more shows to try and break the ice, but so far, our audiences have remained resistant to breaking down the polarization barriers.

Last year, I considered which type of government would be best for the United States. I considered the American voices calling for wage balance, better healthcare, better education, less government waste, and more. And I had concluded that moving toward a social democracy was best for our country.

But, after witnessing the attacks on immigrants, the attacks on American protesters in Los Angeles, Portland, and Minneapolis/St. Paul, the attacks on human rights, the attacks on the press, the illegal attacks on foreign countries, the war crimes, etc., and the willingness of about 40 percent of Americans to still pledge their allegiance to a would-be dictator, I've lost confidence in the idea that social democracy would work in the United States.

What if we were to become an authoritarian state? I wondered. When China moved away from orthodox communism and adopted *market-driven reforms*, it achieved one of the most significant reductions in poverty and the fastest rises in living standards in human history. *Would an authoritarian government such as China's work in the United States*? Think about the current administration's direction. A small circle of Party elites and politically connected business families are now trying to control the country. Under this regime, we'd have no *Freedom of the Press*, just like China. We'd have no freedom of expression, as currently guaranteed by the *First Amendment*. But we'd have an extensive social welfare system that covers healthcare, pensions,

unemployment insurance, poverty relief, and social assistance. Maybe the Chinese market-driven system would work for us...

I considered that form of government more closely. And I determined that the U.S. has one major obstacle to that type of governance. Americans are driven by fear that their livelihoods are eroding. That special interest groups are being granted unwarranted benefits. And that white culture is giving way to other, undeserving cultures. In other words, how do you merge this "hate" element into a market-driven system?

I continue to struggle with "What is the real voice of the American people?" and "What form of government would best serve them?"

I think the answer lies in articulating a voice that would address the concerns of the people — and I'm now convinced that constituents in the Republican and Democratic parties will not compromise.

Should I try to remedy this situation by pushing for a Populist form of government that serves the needs of the majority of the American people?

I wonder...